

The Pagoda Tree

R

B. N. C. 1000

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THE PAGODA TREE

CHAPTER I

THE CRAWFORD FAMILY

ONE warm August evening, ten years ago, the yellow 'bus that plied between Sandgate Station and Sandgate Town carried three passengers—members of one family: a good-looking man of fifty, with expressive grey eyes, close-cut dark hair, and clean-cut features; his wife, a pale, delicate woman, thin to emaciation; and a fair, pretty girl of about twenty. Although their appearance was refined, their clothes were shabby, and the luggage—on the top of the 'bus—was an indication that their circumstances were straitened; it included two of the usual strapped Japanese baskets, a dilapidated Gladstone bag, and a small tin box—all considerably the worse for wear.

"Look, there is the sea, Mother!" exclaimed the man. "Just what you have been longing for."

She turned her white face, with a harassed, weary air, and gazed out of the window in silence.

"When we get to the lodgings," he went on, "and you have had a rest and your supper, you must sit out on the beach and sniff in the fine salt air. It will do you no end of good."

To the casual observer it did not seem as if it were possible for anything to do his wife good. Her worn, haggard face and sunken eyes betokened

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that she was not long for this world. Nevertheless, Elisabeth Crawford was a woman of wonderful spirit; nothing but her spirit had carried her out of bed and brought her down to Sandgate in order to gratify a passionate longing to look once more upon the sea. Her husband and daughter had no idea that she was seriously ill, for she was one who was always cheerful and never complained, but made the best of things—her health included.

Presently they turned off the High Street and came to a row of houses that looked sheer upon the beach; before one of these the 'bus stopped. Mr. Crawford had scraped up sufficient funds to take apartments for a fortnight; he was a clerk in a London insurance office, and this was his annual holiday. The quarters proved to be satisfactory; the sitting-room, which was on the second floor, had a nice little balcony over the beach. As soon as the travellers had finished their supper, Mrs. Crawford lay down to rest, and her daughter set about unpacking, and presently declared that she must go out and do some shopping in the High Street. Her father, glad of an excuse to move, volunteered to escort her, and as they strolled along he glanced above at Shorncliffe and said:

"Twenty-six years ago I was stationed up there, before I embarked for India. I must have a look round. Now I think I shall go and have a turn on the Leas. I believe there is a first-rate band. Would you care to come, Helen? The lift's only a penny!"

"No, not to-night," she answered; "I have several things to see to, and mother doesn't seem very well. Go off and enjoy yourself, but don't be late!" and having

uttered this injunction, she disappeared into a grocer's shop.

With the active, springy step of a man of five-and-twenty, Crawford walked to the Sandgate Lift, and as he waited for it to start, he entered into conversation with the liftman; he was one of those who talked to strangers with genial ease. "It was a good season?" "Yes, the place was very full; the band was playing down at the far end."

When Crawford arrived at the station by the Martello Tower he sauntered along, impressed by the beauty of the evening. Presently he sat down on one of the wooden benches and surveyed the scene. The flashing of "Gris-nez" light—Boulogne's red star, and "Winking Tommy" at Dungeness, attracted his attention, and he watched great liners, brilliantly illuminated, slipping down the Channel—which was as smooth as a mirror—with a feeling of hopeless envy. It was a lovely night—a full moon bathed the world in silver; the strains of the distant band reached him. As he reclined in the corner of the seat and lit a pipe he said to himself: "Here, indeed, is life! Oh, if I could but get away from London for good, and always enjoy the sea and the sun!" As he sat there he began to recall all that had passed since, as a newly joined subaltern, he had put in a few days at Shorncliffe before being dispatched to join his regiment in India. There he had spent four splendid years—the best of his days, although he was always hard up, and frequently in scrapes. Then came his summons home, his father's failure, bankruptcy and death, and subsequently his own extraordinary incapacity for remaining in any of the posts that kind

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friends had helped to secure for him. Afterwards, that trip to Canada, undertaken with constitutional enthusiasm; his dreadful experience of a winter on a ranch in a snow-bound shack; his marriage with Elisabeth Vane, whom he met in Toronto, and with the help of whose fortune they lived for some time in affluence; then came losses, and they ultimately returned to England, there to play the rôle of poor relations; always sinking a little lower in the social scale, and yet they had Elisabeth's one hundred a year, and he earned two pounds a week in an insurance office; but somehow, in their hands, money melted away at an incredible rate! His influential connections were dead, or ignored him, and Crawford told himself that it was a mistake to have lived out of England for ten years. If he had been wise he would have tried for a billet in some warmer climate, since Elisabeth was so delicate; but Elisabeth was difficult to move, also she had absolute control of her own money, and a strong will. How he abhorred the idea of returning to London with its grey, gloomy streets, endless noise, and monotonous toil! Then, with a happy surrender to his environment, he assured himself that he had a whole fortnight of freedom before him, and was resolved to make the most of it!

At this moment a tall, elderly gentleman approached, sat down on the other corner of the bench, and drew out his pipe and tobacco pouch. But, alas! he had no matches! Here was Crawford's opportunity.

"May I oblige you, sir?" he said, handing a halfpenny matchbox, which was accepted with thanks. "A lovely night, isn't it?"

"Yes," agreed the other. "What a moon! It reminds me of India."

"Ah, so you've been in India!" said Crawford briskly.

"I've just come home; I've put in a good spell out there."

"I've been in the 'Shiny,' too," announced Crawford, who always delighted to talk. "I was only out for four years; I wish my spell had been longer."

"My spell was forty."

"Forty!" echoed Crawford. "Forty years in India!"

"Yes—with occasional furlough. And now I've come back to lay my bones in my own country."

"I'd just as soon leave my bones in India! I wish to goodness I saw some chance of seeing the East again!"

"Ah," muttered the other, and he glanced at him critically. There would not be much opening, he thought, for a man of his age, though he was smart, well set up, and had an attractive, vibrant voice. "I suppose you were in the Service?" he asked.

"Yes, in the 25th Buffers; but I've been out of the Army this long time."

"And I," said the stranger, "have been out of the Army about a fortnight! It's rather terrible to find oneself at a loose end, and absolutely master of one's own time—and plans."

"You must have seen a good deal of India?"

"I have," he assented. "I was up in the Punjab and the North-West."

"I was never quartered in that part of the world, but since I came home I have heard that a great-

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uncle of mine, well known in Bengal, had given the Pagoda tree a violent shake. He married a rich Begum, and he was rich himself. When she died she left him a fabulous fortune in jewels, gold, and bonds; but when *he* died it disappeared; no one could discover what had become of it. If I had known this, when I was out there, I'd have gone up north like a shot and had a search—though my regiment was down in Madras; but it was only since I arrived home, and when all my father's affairs were smashed up—he lost every penny in the world through a big financial swindle—that someone said: 'If we had Uncle John's fortune, it would pull us through!'

"What was your uncle's name?"

"The same as my own—John Crawford."

"Oh, by Jove!" exclaimed the other, suddenly sitting erect, and surveying his companion with increased interest; "I remember the fellow. When I first went out to India he was a well-known character; a tall, very old man, with a long white beard, more or less native in his ideas. He lived in native style, was reputed to be rich, smoked a huka, talked Hindustani, and seldom had dealings with people of his own nationality. I believe he made his pile in indigo and land; took a hand in putting down the Mutiny, and held some outlying post with great valour. In his youth he was remarkably handsome, and an elderly Begum fell in love with him, and he married her. They said that he could do what he liked with *her*—and she did what she liked with other people. The Begum had the reputation of being enormously rich."

"I wish you could tell me some more about my

grand-uncle!" said Crawford, rising to his feet and standing in front of his companion.

"I'm afraid I can't help you much; I think he died about thirty-nine years ago, at a place—I forget the name—and there was a good deal of talk as to what had become of his hoards. Some said he had been robbed and poisoned; some, that the money was buried with the usual devil in charge; but it's all an old story now!"

"It's a most interesting story," said Crawford; "especially to *me*, as I happen to be his heir. A little of his fortune would be very acceptable, for I am a poor man."

"Well, I wish I could put you in the way of getting hold of it."

"I wish you could! Supposing, sir, you were in my place—a man with a small income, a delicate wife, and one daughter. Would you capitalise all your money, go out to India and have a search? It would be a case, of course, of all or nothing."

"As a man with a family, I would say '*no*.' The risk would be too great. But if you were like myself, an old bachelor, and had fairly good health, and were not afraid of lots of trouble, a bad climate, and an enormous amount of obstacles, I would certainly chance it."

"You're right," said Crawford. "It's just a gamble—but I've always been a gambler, one way or another. I believe it's in my blood, and what we have in us is bound to come out somehow. I suppose the place to try would be Lucknow, and to hunt up some of the old retainers?"

"Yes; but I doubt if you found them if any of

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them would give you a clue; the chance is a thousand to one! If you ever thought, however, of going out there, I might be able to help you. I have an old Mahomedan servant, whom I have pensioned; he would do a great deal for anyone who came to him with a chit from *me*."

"That's awfully good of you, sir, and some day, perhaps, I may call upon you for this assistance. Of course, it's all in the moon now!" he added, looking up, as if appealing to the glorious full moon, "and, perhaps, the fortune has been dispersed long ago."

"Well, I don't like to buoy you up with false hopes," rejoined the stranger, "but it's rather a curious coincidence that the other day, on board ship, a jeweller, or rather a gem merchant perhaps I should call him, was discussing well-known native stones with an officer who had been for years in India. Everyone knows the whereabouts of the Bolar-pore pearls, and the Morar emeralds—jewels in India are, in a way, as individual as the great diamonds that belong to various crowned heads in Europe—and I heard this man say: 'It's an extraordinary thing that the marvellous gems that descended to the Begum of Radnah have never come into the market—no, not one of them! She was said to have had rubies as big as a man's thumb, pearls the size of pigeons' eggs—for she had not only her family jewels, which had come down to her from the time of Akbar, there was also the quantity of plunder her people had taken from other freebooters. It was said that whoever had the secret of Crawford's hidden treasure, and escaped with his life, would be a millionaire!'"

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"What you tell me is more than I have ever heard about my uncle or his fortune, and makes me extremely keen to go out and search for it at all hazards," and Crawford's eyes shone with sudden excitement.

"Well, should you do so, you might drop me a line: 'General Fenton, East India Club,' and I will send you the promised chit. But I'm afraid the chances are a thousand to one against you. Ah, there's the band playing 'God save the King,'" standing up as he spoke. "I must be off," and with a friendly wave of his hand he turned about and departed.

CHAPTER 11

THE FUNNY GIRL

FOR a long time Crawford sat in the corner of the seat, lost in thought, building castles—not in Spain, but in India. So absorbed was he, that he actually allowed his pipe to go out. He had in his blood an excess of impulsive, imaginative, and even fantastic qualities; he was one of the most sanguine men that ever breathed; always expecting the best—even when facing the worst—and this characteristic, although, in a way, it kept him young and buoyant, had seriously militated against his success in life. As a schoolboy he had been cocksure that he knew his lessons, that he would make a good innings at cricket, that he would come out top of his class—and he was generally wrong! It was with the greatest difficulty that after many hopes, and many dire failures, he had scrambled into the Service. Once there, he seemed to have reached the apex of his ambition! He was like a happy boy about to enjoy a well-deserved holiday. "Jolly" was the adjective in those days, and in his opinion everything was "awfully jolly": his regiment—his station—his mess. A young man of two-and-twenty, with a certain amount of money, his sanguine temperament led him to gambling—he was always confident that his horses would win, that his cards were the best, or that "his luck would turn." Unfortunately, such a disposition

The Funny Girl

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left him at the end of four years heavily in debt. Then came his father's failure and death, and his own gradual and painful descent into actual poverty. He had snatched eagerly at every offered opportunity, but somehow he had not the perseverance or industry which is necessary to success. He was a born rambler; a born free-lance. Perhaps some of his grand-uncle's spirit was in him. He had tried so many means of livelihood—ever sanguine. Fortune for once favoured him when Miss Elisabeth Vane, a Canadian girl, an orphan with some money, attracted by his handsome face, ready tongue, and ardent manner, consented to marry him. Elisabeth Crawford, after twenty-one years of married life, was now a dying woman; her clever, steady brain, sound common sense, and firm will had kept John Crawford afloat through many vicissitudes. His sanguine temperament had caused her much uneasiness; reckless enterprises and foolish gambling on the Stock Exchange had almost dissipated her whole fortune; all that remained was one hundred pounds a year, and to this she clung as to a lifebuoy, since it stood between herself—and what was more precious, her daughter—and destitution.

It was half-past eleven at night when her husband returned, and was admitted by a highly indignant landlady, who glared and muttered, and was entirely unappeased by the soothing excuses of her good-looking lodger. Helen had gone to bed, but the invalid was still wide awake, and for two mortal hours her enthusiastic partner raved, ranted, and enlarged on the subject of his Indian fortune.

"I'm the old man's heir," he declared, walking

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about the room; "Potts, the lawyer, has all our papers to prove it; it only wants a little enterprise. It seemed to me as if it were providential my coming across this fellow on the *Leas* to-night. Fancy; it was only lately, on board ship, that he heard them discussing the Crawford fortune. He has been a few days in England, and one of the first people he tumbles across is old Crawford's *heir*. Think of it! Now, Elisabeth, I know you are not superstitious, but *I* see an enormous amount of encouragement in all this."

"Oh, do you?" she said faintly. "And how?"

"Well, I arrived here this evening, I go up on the *Leas*, and the only soul I speak to there is a man who can tell me all about my uncle—more than ever I knew in my life. You call that nothing?"

"Nothing—nothing!" she murmured. "It was just a coincidence."

"Well, to me it was a sign. If you will be sensible, Elisabeth, for *once* in your life—you can help me."

"How?"

"We will raise a sum of money on that £2,000 of yours—I shall throw up my job in the office—we'll sell off our little belongings, burn our boats, and take ship for India; some of these tramp liners would carry us to Bombay for a mere song—say eighty pounds for the three—and there we are!"

"There we would be, indeed," she repeated under her breath.

"The warm climate will be the making of you, and I've no doubt that a pretty girl like Helen will have a capital chance of settling herself splendidly."

"But how are we to live? What do you propose to do?"

"I shall travel up to Lucknow; it's central to start from; get this old native servant to help me; make friends, as you know I *always* do——"

"I know that people make all they can out of you——"

"Now don't throw cold water on my scheme! Leave it to me, Elisabeth, and you will be wearing your diamonds and driving your motor-car yet as sure as my name is John Crawford."

"My poor, dear John! You have no idea how impossible your plan is. You don't suppose that if any native knew where the treasure was concealed he would tell *you*? After all, why should he? It would be nothing to him that you were Crawford's heir. The money and jewels are Indian, and naturally belong to India; and to prosecute such a search as would be necessary requires a large capital. No, no, John; you know I am always the prudent one in our family, and to this wild goose expedition I will never give my consent."

"Don't say that, my dear; do what is so often recommended: think over the plan; *sleep* on it!"

The next day, after breakfast, Mrs. Crawford crawled out, and sat on the beach; it was a lovely morning. By and by her daughter appeared with a novel, and cast herself down beside her.

"Where is your father, Helen? What is he doing?"

"He has been buying some papers, and when I last saw him he was sitting at the table, with his hands in his hair, studying shipping lists."

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"Helen," said her mother, after a long silence, "I don't suppose you have heard of John Crawford, your father's grand-uncle, who was said to have made a great fortune, married a Begum, and inherited her enormous wealth in India. From time to time your father has crazy fits of wanting to go out to the East and search for this treasure, which is presumably hidden. There is a sort of splendid recklessness about John, and I have always opposed such lunacy. If the fortune is there—your father, who is so sanguine, so generous, and so unpractical, is the last man who would get it! If he did discover it—it would be bound to fall to other people. But he hasn't a chance of success—even supposing that it exists. He does not know the language, he has no money, he has no influence, and he has no clue—as I told him last night."

"I must say I should love to go to India, Mother; it would cure you—if you could bear the journey."

"There is only one more journey for me, my dear—and that I shall take before long."

"Oh, Mother, don't!" seizing her thin hand in hers. "Don't talk like that. You know you are better, and if we could only stay on here, you might get quite well."

Mrs. Crawford shook her head slowly.

"When I am gone, Helen, you must do your best to influence your father. You know his good qualities—his honesty and high notions of honour, his affectionate nature; but he is so impulsive, rash, and so easily carried away. It is much easier for him to do foolish things than it is for other people of a

more sluggish temperament. You will be his guardian, keep him at home, make him comfortable; it will be easier to manage for two—than for three!”

“Oh, Mother, don’t!” protested the girl with passion.

“You must face the future, my dearest, and I look to you to be strong and self-reliant; you have it in you to be both!”

“Of course, I know that father is always too hopeful, and that no matter what his disappointments are he still goes on expecting the best, whether it is a rise of salary, or a fine day. It is certainly extraordinary how sanguine and cheerful he can be. For a man who has been about the world, long hours in an office, just coming home to meals, and then more hours in an office, must be dreadful. When you realise that he has known the other side of life, has raced and played polo, and mixed with gay society, you can understand why the freedom, ease, and liberty in India appeal to him.”

“Yes, my dear, but in India, if he is to live, he must *work*. I’m sure he would not care to be obliged to retire into an establishment for ‘poor Whites.’ Probably he might get employment, but it would be something in an office, and he would find that he had gone out of the frying-pan into the fire. My dear, I do implore you not to encourage your father in his wild scheme of going to India.”

“But you, Mother——”

“My darling, you must leave *me* out of the question.”

“Oh, Mother! Mother!” said the girl in a strangled voice. She looked up at her, and in the

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searching sunlight realised the ghastly worn face, the traces of suffering, the shadow of approaching death, and burying her face in her mother's lap she broke out into convulsive weeping.

A little boy who was passing by with a spade and bucket called back to his nurse :

"Oh, Nin, do look at this funny girl with her head down ! How she is laughing !"

CHAPTER III

THE GENERAL'S CHIT

WHEN Helen and her mother returned to their lodgings for lunch they were informed by Mrs. Cobb, the landlady, that the gentleman had left a message to say he "was going into Folkestone, and might not be back till late." As Mrs. Crawford slowly proceeded to climb the stairs she said to the girl, "I hope he's not goin' to stay out till all hours—same as he did last night?" Then added in another key, "My patience, but your mother *does* look bad!"

To which Helen replied :

"Yes, she felt the journey, but after she has had lunch, and a rest, I hope we shall find her better."

Suddenly there was a curious rustling, shuffling sound, then a heavy fall; they looked up quickly and saw that the sick woman had reached the head of the stairs—and there fainted.

Meanwhile John Crawford toiled up the long Sandgate hill, and made his way to the busy part of Folkestone, staring, as he went, at the fine mansions, the churches, the numbers of prosperous people—promenading, motoring, or being pushed along in bath chairs. No doubt Folkestone was a fashionable and busy place, and had something of a foreign air. In the neighbourhood of the Guildhall the footpath was almost impassable with smart shopping ladies,

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who were exchanging greetings and news. Perambulators also helped to block the way—especially in front of the drapers' windows. These naturally had no fascination for Crawford, but he halted for a long time before a flower and fruit shop. "What peaches, plums and grapes! That bunch of magnificent black Hamburgs—how he would like to take it back to poor Elisabeth; but the price was prohibitive—six and six per pound!"

From the fruiterer's he moved on to the tobacconist's; here he entered and indulged in three ounces of his favourite mixture and a packet of cigarettes. Presently he passed a long looking-glass let into a shop window. Before this he paused unashamed, and gravely surveyed himself. Yes, his clothes were all right—good, well cut, blue serge—(second-hand, and looking double the price he had paid for them). His pot hat was, however, distinctly shabby—the glare of the Folkestone sun magnified its defects; whatever happened he must buy another! After a moment's hesitation he sought out a gentlemen's outfitter, and after five minutes' inspection, and trying on, had suited himself with a smart straw hat—price nine shillings. Now it was his tie that looked shabby and—so to speak, "gave him away," and he selected a choice, quiet affair, price half a crown, and took his departure, highly satisfied with his whole appearance. From the outfitter's to a restaurant was but a few yards, and here he lunched on a chop, green peas, cheese and a glass of beer. Afterwards he lighted a cigarette, and strolled forth in order to find the public library, an easy matter. Here he wrote a couple of letters, made a rapid skimming of the

daily papers and a prolonged examination of the advertisements and dates of the sailings of various lines to Bombay. As it was now after three o'clock he strolled up to the Leas in order to inspect the world and his wife—and listen to the band. As he sauntered along he was sensible of the invigorating effect of his new hat and tie, and felt that he was no longer a mere London clerk, but a retired officer revisiting his former haunts. Presently he discovered "the General," as he mentally called him, tall and dignified, talking to two elderly men, also military no doubt. At first he leant carelessly against the railings, then sat down on a prominent bench and waited, and presently his patience was rewarded, for he caught the General's eye, who, with an excuse to his companions, came across and said :

"Oh, good afternoon; lucky to meet you—for I am off to-morrow to Switzerland—for some time."

"Oh, are you?" said Crawford rather blankly, for in his own mind he had been building on improving the acquaintance.

"Still thinking of the Begum's fortune, eh?"

"I am," admitted Crawford. "I have made up my mind to go out and find it."

The old Indian officer paused, his faded eyes fixed meditatively on the sea. At last he said: "I am afraid you will find a surprising change in many ways after twenty-four years. Everything is double the price—the gorgeous East has become more modern—motors, electricity, education, and tourists have made the old country stir in her sleep."

"Of course I am prepared for all that," said Crawford. Then, with a slight touch of awkward-

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ness : "And now about that address you promised me ? "

"Oh, yes, by Jove ! " and he took out a letter-case from an inner pocket and scribbled on a half sheet of paper, "To Kadir Bux, Lal Khoti, Lucknow. Assist this gentleman if possible—he comes from me." This he signed, folded up, and added his visiting-card. As he handed it to Crawford he said : "I hope the chit will be of some service. The old man will do what he can—I know, you might trust him with your life—but to search for hidden treasure in India in these days is all the same as looking for a needle in a bundle of hay."

"A million thanks, and I'll take my chance."

"A thousand to one, I'm afraid—a rather desperate enterprise. I think you should take a good, long look before you leap ! "

"Well, I have just been looking up the Pot Hook Line to Bombay," rejoined Crawford.

"Oh, have you," said the General. "Well," taking off his hat, "good-bye, I wish you luck," and he walked away to rejoin his companions.

"Who is your friend ? " inquired a military veteran.

"Oh, I only met the fellow for the first time last evening. He has been in the Service, and seems a queer, irresponsible sort of chap who has his head full of some wonderful hidden Indian treasure—and intends to start out at once to make a search."

"Well, I'm blowed—a real wild-cat scheme ! " exclaimed an elderly Colonel as he turned and looked after the erect, active figure now rapidly threading its way through the usual afternoon crowd.

"Yes, and no man goes farther than the man who does not know where he is going," and with this declaration the subject was dismissed.

The effect of the bright scene, gay dresses, brilliant sunshine, charming faces, and inspiring music entered into John Crawford's veins like good old wine as he hurried along with the General's chit in his pocket. This assistance, slender as it was, enabled him—so to speak—to tread on air! As he proceeded briskly homewards the Crawford millions were already his! Yes, and when he was a wealthy man, among other investments he would take a fine big house in Folkestone. And as he passed he threw a promissory glance at a spacious, red-brick mansion. He would have a fine motor boat and a couple of high-powered cars, in order to run about country. These were, of course, visions of the future. To descend to the dull and poverty-stricken present his first step was to get round Elisabeth and persuade her to sell out a couple of hundred pounds. This would pay their passages and give them something in hand. Immediately after arrival he would hunt up Kadir Bux, interview some of the old Uncle's native friends, keep his eyes skinned, and his ears open.

"It isn't as if I hadn't been in India *before*," he reflected complacently. "Food out there is cheap. I remember an officer's wife telling me that she paid a farthing for an egg and sixpence for a fowl—so, even if prices have doubled, we shall get along. We'll take a small bungalow, and live in a small way. Elisabeth will love the warm air and sun, and the flowers. This chit will impress her, I know—it

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is the key to the whole concern, and I'll talk the old girl over as sure as my name is John Crawford."

With this intention firmly implanted in his mind he arrived at the lodgings, to discover Mrs. Cobb on the doorstep evidently looking out for someone.

"Oh, there you are at last!" she screamed as he advanced. "We have been trying to find you for over two hours. I've just sent my lad into Folkestone."

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked, his thoughts suddenly whirled down from a lofty plane.

"Matter," she repeated, surveying him with a pair of hostile eyes. "Your wife is dying—*that's* what's the matter!"

"What!"

"There was death in her face when she crossed this doorstep yesterday. The doctor who has just seen her says she can't last over the night!"

CHAPTER IV

TEARS

THE doctor's verdict was duly confirmed—Elisabeth Crawford never recovered consciousness, and passed away just as a lovely August dawn was shimmering along the horizon. Her husband was stunned—this was a blow he had never anticipated; he was sincerely attached to Elisabeth, the most devoted and unselfish of wives. Alas! here was a case which left no loophole for hopes—no field for further plans; Elisabeth had gone out of the world, and out of his life. Being blessed with an affectionate and faithful heart, he felt his loss very bitterly. Such was his character, that he was always in extremes—extremes of hope, extremes of grief. At the present moment he was bowed to the earth—a broken man who did not care what became of him, or of anyone!

Helen, although she too had her grief to nurse, was compelled to take a prominent part in the melancholy arrangements. Among her mother's effects she had found in an envelope a ten-pound note; on the envelope was written: "This is to pay for my burial—please let it be of the simplest kind." Her wish was carried out—only one cab followed the hearse to the cemetery, where the remains of Elisabeth Crawford were laid to rest with decent formality and respect.

Subsequently father and daughter returned

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forlorn to the empty lodgings where—although so recently the scene of death and sorrow—they decided to remain for their full fortnight.

The little tragedy had made but small stir. The lady on the second floor, who had died the day after she arrived, was soon forgotten among other events. Mrs. Cobb proved unexpectedly kind and sympathetic to Helen. She was sorry for the poor child, and her feelings relented towards Crawford when she witnessed his sincere and profound grief. He and Mrs. Cobb happened to meet in the passage and had a few words together. In reply to the landlady's sympathetic condolence, he said :

"I never dreamt of such a thing as losing her. I knew that she was not strong—that was all. My wife had a way of doing too much, taking everything into her own hands, such a wonderful manager and cook, and so clear-headed and clever—worth a dozen of *me*!"

"No doubt," calmly assented Mrs. Cobb. "The poor thing was just worn out—like a machine. The doctor said her heart was in a dreadful state—and must have been like that for years and years."

"And she never said a word—never complained!"

"No, but surely you could read it all in her face! She has been marked for death this many a day."

"You think so. And maybe you are right. But living together, year after year, one doesn't notice a difference, the same as strangers. My wife was very handsome—the real Canadian type, with an exquisite complexion, and of course she was always beautiful to *me*," he added, and his eyes filled up. "She was too good for this world—a real saint—and God

knows how I am ever going to get on without her ! ”

His emotion was now so overpowering that he was compelled to fumble for his handkerchief.

“You have your daughter, Mr. Crawford, a nice girl, if ever there was one. It seems to me that she worshipped her mother, and she is heartbroken.”

“Yes, that’s true, and I should not be thinking altogether of my own trouble. I must try and cheer her up a bit and take her out for a turn,” and, hastily returning the handkerchief to his pocket, Crawford ran lightly upstairs. Ten minutes later Mrs. Cobb watched the couple walking down to the beach, the tall slim girl in cheap black, the spruce, active man in his smart serge suit (a black tie was his only mourning—he could not run to more).

“There they go !” she muttered to herself. “Miss Crawford will grieve for her mother till the day of her death, but as for *him*—he will marry again within a twelvemonth !”

CHAPTER V

CRAWFORD HELPS HIMSELF

FATHER and daughter returned to their dismal little flat in a dull, dark street off the Strand, and settled down as best they could to face the new situation. Mrs. Crawford's scanty wardrobe was given away, her workbasket and blotter were put out of sight; her empty chair still stood in the window as a thing apart. The pair had entered on a new experience—the solitude *à deux*; Crawford, who took everything in an exaggerated form, dwelt continually upon his loss, and claimed comfort and sympathy, not only from his fellow clerks, but even from the postman and newsboy! There were no shades in the character of his joys or sorrows—with him it was all, or nothing; and for the present the great Indian scheme was completely swept out of his thoughts; the precious address and visiting-card had been thrust away—where was immaterial—he had forgotten their existence; his heart and mind were filled with the sense of his recent loss and the poignant memories of poor Elisabeth. How he missed her at every turn!

Helen's time hung heavily on her hands. There was no one now to care for—or wait upon; house-keeping was an easy matter; her father had a small appetite and simple tastes, but was particular about his clothes and linen—which had been her mother's special care. (Elisabeth was secretly proud of her

good-looking husband.) When the meals had been prepared, and the sewing done, there were still many spare hours to be filled in, and Helen bethought herself of Mrs. North, the Rector's wife and help-mate. The Norths were a golden couple—the stay, comfort and joy of their parish. He was a tall, bearded man of sixty, with a breezy manner, a carrying voice, and an eloquent tongue, who worked—so to speak—day and night, and was a confirmed Socialist. Mrs. North, an aristocrat by birth, years her husband's junior, was dainty, pretty, and untiring in her efforts concerning crèches, refuges and schools; it was said of her she was "as good as two curates." This kind, childless lady had taken poor, lonely Helen under her motherly wing, but her time for special cases of idle young women was limited. She now found her a post in a crèche. Some years previously she had procured for the girl the post of reading for two hours daily to an elderly couple, whose family had dispersed, and whose eyesight was failing; for this service Helen received a pound a week. The sum was acceptable, and added many little comforts and necessities to the Crawford ménage—such as a top coat (second-hand), extra coal, and a sewing machine.

Sir Hercules and Lady Trevor had lived for many years in India, where he had held a high appointment—they now occupied a luxurious flat on Hay Hill. He was eighty-two years of age, and remembered the Mutiny, but rarely touched upon this tragic topic. Sir Hercules had a good wide knowledge of native states, their family feuds and histories, and when he chose to talk was well worth listening to. His study,

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a severe-looking but comfortable room, was lined with low, well-filled bookcases; there was a writing-table, several arm-chairs, a few Indian maps and Indian sketches on the walls, and rare Indian arms over the mantelpiece. It was the retreat of a retired official, and there, five mornings a week, Helen read aloud *The Times*, and attended to the old man's correspondence, also the telephone.

Lady Trevor had her own snug sitting-room, which opened directly out of the study. It was full of Indian mementoes—peacock feathers, fans, brasses, embroideries, and so on.

"I live among my memories," she declared. "Everyone of them tells me some tale. The silver bowl from Lucknow I won as a prize at Badminton; the embroidery I bought in Cashmer, that huka I got from a hill coolie, and besides there are odds and ends from other countries—we travelled about before we came to anchor. That jar is from Seville, the copper tray I found in a little inn in the Pyrenees."

"How much I should like to see the world!" said Helen, but she uttered this aspiration long before she had heard of her father's crazy scheme.

Her task with the old lady consisted in reading aloud, picking up dropped stitches, and answering little notes.

Occasionally the readings to Sir Hercules would be interrupted by some interesting reminiscences, and one evening, sitting over the fire with her father, Helen, in an evil moment, repeated a tale that proved a spark in gunpowder, and awoke, as from a long sleep, the dream of India!

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For the last four months Crawford's thoughts had been concentrated on his bereavement, the memories of Lizzie, and their youth, their struggles, their transient successes and failures; in a way he was living in the past—when not actually occupied with his work, or talking, or reading the news, or going with Helen to a cinema, or with a man to a music-hall—"one must," as he told himself, "have some sort of relaxation!" Now, all at once, Helen's chance word had produced a magical effect, and—as if the room had been touched by a searchlight, the heavy clouds of inaction and depression were dispersed—the vision of the East was before him, in colours more attractive than ever. After a weighty silence he said:

"So Sir Hercules knows the United Provinces to his fingers' ends, does he? What a chance! Ask him if he ever heard of the Begum of Radnah and John Crawford? He might be a wonderful help." The idea grew. "By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I'll go and see him!" springing up and beginning to pace the room.

"No, no, no, Father, *please* don't do that," protested Helen. "He does not receive strangers. The old people live very quietly—as they say—in a dim backwater, after the glare of India—though I know they love that country."

"Of course they love it, especially a big pot in the Civil Service! Enjoying thousands of rupees, and no end of importance. Well, Nellie, if you forbid me to call you will have to find out a lot of things for me."

"Yes, but what things?"

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"Oh, you know—any details about the Begum. I believe it's seventy years since she died. And full particulars as to where Uncle John lived—that's most important—most important!" he reiterated with emphasis.

"Well, Dad, I'll do my best for you—but what is the good of bothering?"

"Great good, my dear child!"

"Surely you would never think of going out to India now!"

"Why not? I'm young for my age—active—energetic. As for you—India is the Land of Promise for pretty girls!"

"If you mean Promise of Marriage—I don't wish to marry."

"At one-and-twenty—I suppose not. That's what all girls say!"

"And I'm not pretty."

"I'm not so sure. You are, of course, not a patch on your mother—what a complexion, what eyes, with lashes an inch long; but you have some points, a fine head of hair, perfect teeth, and the family figure. Oh, you will pass in a crowd, without a shove!" and with this encouraging pronouncement he got up and left her.

Several days elapsed, a delay that was irritating to Crawford, before Helen, the reader, had an opportunity of bringing him the information he required.

"So you got it at last!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, Sir Hercules was in a reminiscent mood to-day, and I ventured a few questions."

"Good—go on!"

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"He was immensely interested in hearing that you were related to John Crawford, and said that he was an indigo planter and landowner—native in his methods, and as ruthless and rapacious as a shark."

"A nice character."

"But remarkably handsome, a marvellous horseman, and a shameless adventurer—all for himself—though on one occasion he fought with great courage in Skinner's Horse."

"Yes—any more?"

"In his old age he became a despot and a miser—and went in hourly fear of assassination."

"Where *did* he live—that's the main point?"

"He thinks he lived near Koshanabad, but is not certain—in a quaint old walled village, guarded by his retainers who were armed to the teeth. The authorities winked at his eccentricities—knowing that when he died all the pomp and circumstance of this English Thakur and potentate would crumble into dust."

"So it would—but gold and jewels cannot crumble."

"Sir Hercules had heard of the jewels; they *did* exist—in fact, they do exist! But are lost to the world for ever."

"That's his opinion," scoffed Crawford. "He's an old dotard—and his opinions are not worth a paper spill! But he has given us a valuable tip—the possible locality of the lair!"

"Surely, Father——"

"Surely, Helen," he interrupted, "I am going to India, and you too." He rose and began to walk up and down the room, gaining strength of purpose with

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every stride as the fields of Elysium stretched out before him. "We will take up a couple of hundreds of your £2,000, and that will start us."

"No, Father, I cannot touch it. I will not touch it; I promised mother."

"Did you? So then it's a case of the dead hand! Well, I shall get the money by hook or by crook, you'll see."

"Oh, Daddy dear, do put India out of your head; we are happy as we are!"

"Happy! You don't know what it is to be happy, my poor child, having spent most of your life in poverty. Certainly you have been well educated, thanks to your mother's exertions; but happy—in these dreary rooms, not knowing a soul except your Sunday class, the Norths, and the old Trevors; your only pleasure a ride on the top of a 'bus, or a couple of hours at a cinema! Happy! Good Lord!" and he threw his cigarette into the fire with violence and sat motionless, staring at the flames in meditative silence for more than half an hour. At last he said:

"There's not much good in trying to get money out of *my* people! They were nasty before I went to Canada, and when I came back to this country insisted on treating me as a black sheep—simply because I happened to be poor and unsuccessful. Certainly my sister Theo *did* come forward with a loan, but she was so rude and standoffish to your mother that I've never repaid her, and, naturally, she has dropped me! Theo is my only near relation—Lady Maltby, no less! She lives up in Northumberland, thank the Lord, so we never run across one another! I've been badgering my brains to think where I'll raise some

ready money. The furniture might bring sixty pounds with luck; but sixty pounds is no use, and money for passages is cash down!"

In order to divert his thoughts, the crafty girl said:

"Mrs. North and her niece had tea with me to-day."

"Oh, well, I hope you gave them something besides bread and butter!"

"Yes, I gave them scones and seed cake, and best of all a sight of our old Queen Anne silver. I can't tell you how they admired it—especially Mrs. North. She almost *raved*!"

"By Jove, I'd almost forgotten the silver; I believe it's out of the common, eh?"

"Yes; the Vanes, who you know were Jacobins, took it with them when they fled to Virginia. Some of it was lost when they moved to Canada; but the teapot, milk jug, sugar bowl, and candlesticks are still a joy for ever."

"Not much of a joy," protested Crawford, "when they only see the light about once in a blue moon"; and again he relapsed into silence. His mind was working; he had lost, or laid astray, the precious "chit," and had only recalled its existence during the last fortnight. What the devil had he done with it? Thrown out of his hand when distracted about Elisabeth. He remembered Kadir Bux's address; but then he had no introduction. He had hunted every hole and corner, and all to no purpose. Could he have tossed it into the waste-paper basket? Later on, after Helen had gone to bed, standing before the fire, his eyes wandered round the chimney glass. A

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sudden happy thought! Could he have thrust it behind the mirror?—the popular receptacle for visiting-cards and notes? (they had very few such). Yes, certainly there was a bit of paper sticking out! A tiny scrap, which had evidently been shoved far in for safety. With the aid of a penknife and considerable outlay of patience, he worked out the scrap; behold the chit, and General Fenton's card!

About a week later Crawford came into the sitting-room long before his usual hour, and closing the door he stood for a moment leaning his back against it. Then he announced in a high, jubilant key:

"Great news, my little girl! Great news! Next month we start for *India!*"

Helen laid down her work and gazed at him with a face of blank bewilderment; he appeared to be serious.

"You see, my dear," coming forward as he spoke, "you would not give a hand, and so I've helped myself! The passage money is lodged. Oh, yes, you may stare and wonder; that old silver belonging to the Vanes, which they took with them——"

Helen coloured up to her hair.

"Mother's silver!"

"Well, it was for your good, as well as mine, and *you* drew my attention to it. I carried it off two days ago. A fellow in the office, who is crazy on old things, and a great authority on marks, helped me to get rid of it. We tried several places, and at last I got my price. What do you think? For teapot, sugar bowl, jug, and candlesticks—time of Queen

Anne—£200. I have the money here, after paying for the passages—£35 apiece. Now, what do you say? "

"Oh, Father," she gasped out, "how could you do all this—without one word to me?"

"Because, for one thing, I *am* your father; and for another, I knew you'd do your best to put a stopper on my scheme! Grinding out returns in an office will never make a man's fortune, and my fortune and yours is lying awaiting us, stored away in some snug hiding place under the hot, red soil of India."

"You know that mother always dreaded this."

"Yes, I know; but, poor darling, her health was weak, and she had lost her nerve and initiative. I can tell you she had plenty of both when we were married and faced her relatives and the world together! " Then, looking round the room, he continued: "This good, solid furniture, which she chose, will fetch something—say sixty pounds; I shall burn my boats. You must get yourself some thin frocks, and a sola topee, and a couple of evening-gowns—and a habit. Yes, you can pick up one second-hand; you are stock size. I'll give you £30, and I know you will make it go a long way. And Mrs. North will advise you. I am going out again now; don't worry." And then, as if fearing a scene, he opened the door and hurried from the room.

Helen sat for an hour with idle hands and a busy brain, thinking and thinking, endeavouring to realise the future. With regard to the present, the situation had slipped from her helpless grasp.

"So you are off to India; how I shall miss you,"

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said Lady Trevor, when Helen broke the news of her departure. "I do envy you; I wish I'd that part of my life to live over again."

"And so your father is after the Crawford treasure?" said Sir Hercules. "Tell him to keep a close mouth. India—itself—is all ears!"

"Yes, I'll tell him, thank you."

"At the same time I look on his enterprise as the most amazing, most opera-bouffé affair! It can have but one end—disappointment. But you, young lady, will put in a very gay, amusing time."

"Yes, lots of tennis, balls, and picnics," chimed in his wife.

"I'm afraid not; we are much too poor for society."

"What about your outfit?" inquired Lady Trevor, who was fond of dress and had been celebrated for the elegance of her toilettes. "What have you thought of? What frocks and hats?"

"I have not much to spend. In the first place I must buy boxes."

"Oh, how uninteresting! As to luggage, I believe I can find you a couple of seasoned overland trunks. I am not likely to want them again."

"Thank you; that will be indeed a help, and leave more for my frocks and hats."

"What about these?"

"White washing frocks, a sort of Sunday dress; a sola topee, gloves, shoes, and an evening-gown—black, I think. Father has given me thirty pounds."

"Thirty pounds," repeated Lady Trevor. "Ridiculous! Why, I spent that on one gown, and believe me, there is cold weather out there—frost

and snow—especially up north. You will want a serge, and a warm coat. I can give you a fur one, and a boa—no use to me now; and you know I've no daughters!"

"Oh, you are too kind!" said Helen, with tears in her eyes. "Yes, too kind," she repeated, and her voice shook.

"Come, cheer up; are you not delighted to be going to the land of the sun?"

"No, my mother was always against it. I can't altogether forget this—though I shall love to see that wonderful country."

"I see your mother was a woman of sense," remarked Sir Hercules. "Wandering round, searching for a treasure, is a job for a man of unsurpassed courage and folly. Your father, having no status out there, or obvious reason for his visit, will find himself awkwardly placed—neither fish, flesh or fowl, not even a tourist! I have a nephew who is in the Secretariat. I'll drop him a line and tell him to look out for you, in case you should find yourself—as I don't doubt you will—up a tree! There is his address"—taking up a stylo and writing down, "Arbuthnot Harrison, Esq., I.C.S., The Moorings, Simla."

"Thank you very much for your kindness, Sir Hercules, but I do hope I may not have to trouble him. Even if father's plans come to nothing I may find something to do."

"Not an easy matter in India—that is to say for a girl—unless you have gone in for medicine or languages. I'm sorry to pour water on your hopes."

"Miss Crawford will be all right out there," said

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his wife, who admired Helen immensely and had no fears respecting her future. Then, as she accompanied her to the entrance, she said: "I'll send the boxes and the wrap to your address, my dear, and you must come and see us as often as ever you can before you start. I don't know what we shall do without you!"

The old lady proved to be even better than her word, for when the cabin trunks arrived they were found to contain not only the fur coat, but a neat tailor-made, and a graceful white evening-gown. There was also a little note written by Lady Trevor in her scrawly, shaking hand:

"Pray accept these trifles (which have already been to India) and also the two new frocks, which I hope will fit. It affords me the greatest pleasure to know that they will be worn by a dear young friend in a country that I love but can now only visit in my dreams!

"AGNES TREVOR."

CHAPTER VI

PASSENGERS ON THE *PARAGON*

It was a lovely day in early June when Crawford and his daughter travelled down from London to join the tramp steamer *Paragon*, of the Pot Hook Line to Bombay, which lay in dock at Birkenhead, and, having taken on board a cargo of rails, rolling-stock and machinery (that loaded her to the Plimsoll mark), was now ready to put to sea. In spite of her name, the *Paragon* was by no means a prepossessing boat. Looking down upon her from the dock, she seemed disappointingly small, mean, and weather-beaten; also badly in want of a new coat of paint. However, she had been built for trade, and not for pleasure; and Crawford, a little dashed, said to himself: "Beggars cannot be choosers!"

The saloon was at the foot of the steep companion ladder and rather dark, the cabins to correspond. Tea was being served as the Crawfords entered—they were the last arrivals; the other passengers were already assembled round the board, at which the Captain, a little brown, roundabout man, with twinkling eyes and a reserved manner, presided.

Among the company was a young-old lady, who was not a prospective voyager; she had a thin-lipped mouth, rather hard eyes, and her air was more forbidding than attractive. She did not join in conversation, merely sipped and stared. Helen

was considerably surprised when after tea she accosted her with a mysterious air and, drawing her aside, said :

"Excuse me, but I want to ask you to do me a great favour. You see that young girl in black, her name is Mrs. Charles Taylor; she is the widow of our dear and only brother, and is now returning to India, which is her *native* land. She is terribly nervous and excitable—I suppose it is her nature. We have had a fearful experience, since the death of my brother, and we hope that the voyage may do her good. As she is alone, and you have such a kind, sweet face, I was wondering if you would look after her?" (And, as Helen mentally added, have a "*fearful* time.") "Sometimes she is like a crazy creature, and threatens suicide; but of course we know that people who talk in that way are quite safe! *They* never take their lives. Well, it will be a real good deed, and stand to you in The Great Account if, now and then, you have an eye on Lorna. She is extraordinarily impulsive and affectionate, and will love you for a look!—that's how she caught my poor brother—and here, if you want it, is an act of charity to your hand."

During this harangue Helen had no chance to interpose a single word, but of course she felt bound to undertake what she was asked to do, and be kind to this miserable, forlorn and "friendless young widow. Her eyes were so appealing—her pretty little plaintive mouth, which drooped at the corners, would have touched a harder heart than hers.

"It is not a *mental* case!" added the other

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woman eagerly, "but just the strain of her grief and a naturally excitable nature."

"Well, I will do what I can," said Helen.

"Thank you; you have taken a load off my mind. Somehow, when I saw you sitting opposite to me at the table, I said to myself, *she* is the one passenger to whom I must appeal! Ah, there goes the bell for the shore. I don't want to be carried off to Bombay, so good-bye," and, wringing Helen's hand in a painful grasp, this passing acquaintance sped up the gangway.

The company of passengers numbered seven grown-ups and two small fretful children who were entered together as half fare. Their mother, Mrs. Haines, was a pale, dejected, shabby little creature—the wife of a subaltern—who, tired of enduring her "in-laws'" indignities, had cut herself adrift—*coûte que coûte*—and steered forth to join her husband; then there was the young widow, Mrs. Taylor, a graceful, melancholy girl of about twenty, in deep mourning. Mr. James Hawkins, an Indian official of some standing, tall, gaunt, dogmatic and selfish, aged about fifty; Captain Bird, another seasoned old Indian, was elderly but slim and upright as a boy; he wore a small bleached moustache, and behind pince-nez lay a pair of sharp blue eyes; he was so uncommonly well turned out from head to heel that one rather wondered what he was doing in *cette galère*—this passenger ship for paupers. Last of all was Mr. Harvey Strong, a young man with a keen dark face and a somewhat lowering expression, an engineer by profession, who had taken a trip in this tramp, not for reasons of economy, but because he was anxious

to do some work, and not be interrupted or bothered by the usual gay crowds on a fashionable liner; he foresaw many delightful long hours of leisure, sitting undisturbed in a deck-chair, reading and thinking and making notes, instead of being peremptorily summoned to play quoits, to dance, or to join a table at bridge. Mr. James Hawkins, the collector, had no need to study economy; he was a wealthy man, but also a miser; he loved money for its own dear sake; a bachelor without any close ties, his heart was imprisoned in his purse. When in India he kept no style and no establishment, but lived in the cheapest way, and rented the smallest bungalow in his station, a proceeding which brought down on him the wrath and scorn of his fellow civilians and the contempt of the whole community. James Hawkins did not care; he subsisted on half his entertaining allowance and forwarded the solid balance to his bankers, where his account grew to surprising proportions. Owing to this failing he had never enjoyed his life—no, not even as a boy; as a young man, he was always “putting by,” always declaring that he was too poor, and that he could not afford to have a wife or horse or a motor, and, least of all, to give subscriptions. Such was his obsession that the authorities knew him to be a hopeless crank, and he was relegated as such to an out-of-the-way station, where he would be—so to speak—hidden from the public eye! Nevertheless, Hawkins was a clever, reliable official, well-read, and a ripe Oriental scholar, and fairly generous with Government funds. His opinion on various weighty questions was sought and respected; he occasionally sent arresting articles to the papers, and

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was an authority on Indian antiquities and Persian poems. He and Harvey Strong had taken passage in the *Paragon* for their special reasons, and not for lack of funds; but it was different with the others—Mrs. Taylor, Mrs. Haines, Captain Bird and the Crawfords—who were all more or less “hard up.”

The dinner hour found the *Paragon* in the river; by bedtime she had passed the lightship and was at sea. The night was calm and the sky powdered with stars. Helen found that her cabin was opposite to that of the pretty, fair Mrs. Taylor, with whom she had foregathered, and was glad to be her neighbour; but Mr. Harvey Strong was not so agreeably situated—the poor fellow was next to Mrs. Haines and her pair of screaming infants. I regret to add that after a time he lost his temper, forgot his manners, and thumped so violently on the partition that little Cissy Haines almost wished herself back under the slates in the home of her dreaded mother-in-law!

The month being June, the weather was perfect, the sea like glass, and everyone settled down amicably. Even the little Haineses found their sea-legs, and ceased to scream. The elder, Wattie, had a detestable habit of picking up stray articles, running to the side, and throwing them over the bulwarks. The expression of the captain's face when he saw his best night-glasses thus go by the board was not to be described.

The *Paragon* carried neither doctor nor stewardess, but a very large company of bold and hungry rats, which swarmed into the saloon at night in search of provender. Helen had an unpleasant

experience with one of these creatures. In climbing up the steep companion ladder she laid her hand on the balustrade, and found that it rested on something warm and soft—in short, on a rat who was in the act of coming down; it would be hard to say which was the more startled, Helen or the rodent!

By the time the boat had touched at Marseilles the seven and a half passengers had become acquainted, had taken the measure of one another and resolved themselves into sets or, properly speaking, couples. Couple number one was John Crawford and Captain Bird; they were almost inseparable and had apparently much in common. They smoked, played cards, paced the deck for hours, and exchanged experiences. Crawford, a tireless talker, had already divulged the whole of his scheme to this stranger. His tale was listened to with profound interest, and his new friend offered him both advice and encouragement.

"You see," he said, "I am an old Indian myself, and I know what I am talking about; you will be all right and will get what you want if you lie low and say nothing. Of course, I've heard of these hidden fortunes—India is chock full of them, silver bars, lakhs and lakhs of gold mohurs, mostly stuffed into jars, or earthen chatties, such as those that figure in Ali Baba. There are also masses of jewels, ropes of great pearls—these are generally put away in some sacred place of the Brahmins, or buried under the floor of a Zenana—neither of which are easy of access. But even the most holy native is open to a *bribe*. I was born in India, my father before me—we are a good old crusted Anglo-Indian

family; I know several languages—Telugu, Marathi, Urdu and a smattering of that vile tongue Tamil—so if you take me on as your interpreter I might be able to lend you a hand.”

“It is most awfully good of you to offer, my dear fellow,” the other replied; “but, as I told you, I am a poor man—poor as a rat—and it will be as much as I can do to keep my head above water when I first get into the country. I couldn’t think of taking up your time, as, of course, I know you have your own job.”

“As for that, I think *your* job the most exciting and amusing. I’d chuck mine like a shot; I am only a bottle washer and agent to the manager of a tea estate. I was in the Service, as you know, but had to leave on account of ill health. I am independent. I’ve no ties; my hat covers my family. I can play a game of poker, I can pick out a winner, and I can treat the world as mine oyster; so if you want any help or backing, old man, you may bank on Freddy Bird. I shouldn’t wonder if that old servant, Kadir Bux, was able to give you the end of a clue.”

Another pair were Messrs. Hawkins and Strong. The former made determined sallies into the bows, and insisted that his reluctant victim should take a certain amount of exercise, and together these two Anglo-Indians would pace the deck, talking and disputing about assessments and taxes, famines and factories, moneylenders and forestry. The loud aggressive voice of the elder generally drowned that of his companion; and at table Mr. Hawkins had the conversation, so to speak, all his own way; even talkative

John Crawford was silenced and for once relegated into the part of listener; whilst Captain Bird afforded an amusing study in all the poses of boredom! In his harsh, authoritative voice, Hawkins argued with the captain respecting tides, and with Strong regarding gradients; and the latter, to the secret joy of Helen, generally got the worst of the encounter. Hawkins's knowledge of India was apparently profound, and he would advance some startling theories, and not a few sinister prophecies.

"I suppose you could tell us a good deal about the hoards of gold hidden in the country?" said Crawford suddenly.

It was precisely as if he had sounded a trumpet call! Hawkins threw back his head, his nostrils dilated, and his eyes blazed.

"Hoard of gold! I believe you, my dear fellow. Why, in India you are *walking* upon gold! There are enormous hoards in the country. The hiding and hoarding has been going on for over two thousand years. Old people in the secret die, and the whereabouts of the treasure is forgotten, or all trace is lost. I could run off the names of a dozen well-known stores, but where they lie no man knows. In former days, when invading armies looted and overran the country, people buried their money and jewels and fled, and as a rule never returned. The wealth of the East is absolutely untold—such diamonds, that will never again see the light of day; stones that would put the Koh-i-noor to shame; ropes of pearls; billions of gold and silver—all concealed in the earth or in crumbling old fortresses. The native is a cunning hider—no one better! Parts of Oudh are teeming

with spoil; so are the banks of the Indus, the Marathi plains too; and it would not surprise me if some of the old ruins outside Delhi were fuller of coin than the Bank of England itself. Lots of the loot have been lost, but there are also wonderful family jewels—far surpassing Western imagination—some laid away for ever in the dark, others brought out at long intervals for marriages or feasts; none paying any interest, and of no use to anyone—just *dead capital*."

"I suppose you have heard of my grand-uncle's fortune?" said Crawford.

"Why, of course. He lived for a short time in my own district; he was a Thakur, had a great business in indigo, and married a Begum!"

"And what about the fortune?"

"He survived to a great age; latterly they say he was afraid of being murdered—and had all his money moved by stealth and by degrees by some trusty servants, and it is said that when he had everything safe and secure he shot them, on the principle that 'dead men tell no tales'!"

"Oh, how horrible! What a monster!" exclaimed Helen.

"Yes; but not in appearance. By all accounts he was an uncommonly good-looking fellow; a handsome face"—and he glanced at her father—"goes a long way! He made an impression on the old Begum, and the former favourite got kicked out, or poisoned. 'One man's misfortune is another man's luck,'" and with this axiom he swung round his chair and took his departure.

Another prominent couple were Mrs. Taylor and

Helen. The latter had never had many girl friends : one or two schoolfellows who had somehow drifted out of her orbit. Her mother had ever been her friend and confidante. She was delighted to encounter a girl of her own age. They were the only two on board, for all poor Mrs. Haines's youth had been crushed out of her by the grinding forces of poverty and domestic tyranny.

Pretty Lorna Taylor was of a type that Helen had not yet encountered. She was demonstrative, impulsive and affectionate, and kissed Helen violently on the second day out, and implored her to love her a little tiny bit and call her by her Christian name.

"Oh, I am so lonely and so unhappy," she urged with pathetic appeal.

This was undoubtedly true—she often came to table with red eyes—and Helen would hear her sobbing in her cabin. The one burthen of her grief—ever repeated—was, "Oh ! my poor boy ! Oh ! my poor boy ! Oh ! my poor boy !" Many a night across the passage she would listen to this agonised cry.

At first she did not like to intrude on such terrible grief ; but remembering her promise to the stranger, at last she ventured to step over and offer what comfort she could, sometimes sitting for a couple of hours holding the widow's hot little hand in hers, listening sympathetically as she poured out the emotions of an overflowing heart, till finally she would drop asleep. She would also read, relate stories, and endeavour, to the best of her power, to detach the poor girl's thoughts from the grave at Ealing. And these

thoughtful attentions were continued on deck, where Helen would sit by or walk with the stricken girl for hours.

Lorna Taylor was fair and pretty, with masses of light hair and a pair of beseeching eyes; she had tiny, boneless hands, and an apparently boneless and wonderfully graceful figure. Hers was the emotional temperament of the tropics: at times in surprisingly high spirits, again, in the black depths of abysmal woe. Occasionally these culminated in fits of screaming hysterics, when her condition seemed to border on madness. During her hours of reaction and depression she would refuse to come to meals, and Helen would carry her cups of broth or any little dainty dish that was procurable, and tempt her to eat, exerting all her powers of persuasion—usually with success.

Yet after one of these alarming outbursts Helen would be dumbfounded to come upon the mourner exchanging animated sallies with the first officer, or lying in ambush to entrap Harvey Strong! What a strange girl—an extraordinary mixture of two characters: devoted and unconsolable, yet gay, irresponsible, and volatile!

Mrs. Taylor quickly realised her friend's surprise, and said:

"I am a born butterfly, all for the sun, and this breaks out in spite of my broken heart. After I have been laughing and joking up here, I go down to my cabin and stamp on myself for a wicked, heartless beast, and though I laugh, I can never be happy again. Do not look so grave and puzzled." And she fell upon her friend and suffocated her with kisses.

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More than once, after a nervous breakdown, Mrs. Taylor would calmly discuss the subject of suicide :

"Listen to me, darling. Only for sharks, I think I would drown myself—I *would*! Charlie is gone. Why should I stay behind? And drowning is so easy. I've seen the sweeper drowning kittens in a bucket—it is nothing."

"But what of the sharks in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean?"

"Ah!" shuddering violently. "Oh, my! Yes, I should fear *them*!"

Ten days passed, and they had entered the Mediterranean. The *Paragon* was a very slow boat, and Mrs. Taylor became more normal. She would help Helen, who was making thin frocks for the little Haineses in which to face the heat; their mother was a hopeless sailor, and the two boys had been, so to speak, thrown on the charity of the passengers and crew, who were wonderfully responsive, forbearing, and kind.

As the two girls sat sewing under the awning, their tongues were not idle, especially the tongue of Lorna, who talked incessantly. Helen had told her friend all about the sudden death of her mother, their narrow circumstances, and lack of near relations. She also spoke of her father's great scheme; this was no breach of confidence, for his errand was now, as it were, published to the whole ship, including the steward's pantry and engine-room. Helen begged her friend to advise her as to what to do, and how to live in a strange country, how to make a little money go as far as possible.

"My grannie will show you all that," was the un-

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expected answer, "when you arrive. You come home with me!"

"Oh, but I cannot leave father," protested Helen.

"No; but he can leave you. I heard him telling that horrid little Bird man that when he got out he wanted to explore—but how arrange to go alone? I have thought it all out, so you must come to Chitari with me—you must! Do not shake your head, darling, and say no. Grannie will love you, and when your father calls you—then you can go!"

"It is very kind. I don't know what to say. I don't know father's plans."

"At first I would not have dared," continued Lorna. "I saw at once you were of better class—like officers' wives. I said when I saw you come: she will be too grand to chum with *me*; but now what would I do without you, and how would I travel alone? I am *sure* to have one of my breakdowns."

"You will get over that before we are in Bombay."

"No, no, never. I have talked heaps to you, but never of my past and all about my home and my grannie."

CHAPTER VII

A LUCKY ACCIDENT

"WOULD you care to hear all that has happened to me in my twenty years?" inquired Lorna, laying her tiny hand on Helen's knee.

"Yes, of course I would; I'm sure it will be interesting."

"Interesting," repeated Lorna Taylor. "I don't think that is the word to describe my life; but anyway, dearie, you shall judge for yourself. I am an orphan, and my family live in India; it has always been my home. After father's death I was brought up by my grannie, who had an hotel in the hills. She and Aunt Lily, who is eight years older than I am, ran it together. It had a big name, and I believe grannie made lakhs of rupees. Anyway, she sent me to a good school, and I can chatter a little, little French: '*Oui, merci, s'il vous plait,*' you know! Play the piano and dance; but I am not clever—no; I hated lessons always. When I was supposed to be finished I settled down to live with grannie, and gave some help with the accounts and correspondence. A number of people were always coming and going—oh, it was so gay!—and among these was Charlie Taylor, who was in the Government Survey and had a post in the neighbourhood. He was most awfully good-looking and so nice and cheery. We met every day by chance, or not—for I helped Aunt Lily with

the new-comers, and arranging tables, places, and flowers. So he and I got to know one another rather well. Charlie was almost the first young man I had come across, and I confess that I grew to like him immensely, and rather hoped he liked me. Then, all of a sudden, without any warning, he went away, and as I saw the mail tonga bumping down the hill, I really felt as if I should *die*. His departure was not only a surprise, but a shock! Oh my, I did cry! I could not help it. I had been so happy, and now all light seemed to have gone out of my life! I tried to keep my trouble to myself; but I grew thin, pale, ugly, and cross. Then one day, coming into the veranda, my heart stood still! I found Charlie standing there, and I was so astonished and overwhelmed that I could not speak one word; but he said my *face* told him all he wanted to know! He returned to tell me I had never been out of his thoughts, and that he had come to ask me to marry him! As he was above me in position, and a dear, nice fellow, my people were awfully pleased with the match. Charlie had been granted furlough, so the wedding was hurried up, and after a short honeymoon we sailed for England—oh my, but I was sick!—to see his relations and to spend his leave. Charlie's father and mother lived at Ealing, and we took a small furnished house in the neighbourhood, or rather they engaged it for us. Oh, such a horrible dull little hole, on the roadside, facing north. The family consisted of a stiff, cranky father, an invalid mother, and two ugly sisters—much older than Charlie, but always called 'the girls.' I soon found that the Taylors were not pleased with Charlie's marriage, nor with me. They were awfully sharp and

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inquisitive, and formal. They said I should not powder, nor wear patchouli, or smoke cigarettes, and were always picking faults. To make a long story short, they made me miserable every time I entered their house or they came into mine. Nothing that I said or did was right, and my awful extravagance would be, so they said, the ruin of poor Charlie. I really did not spend much on myself, but it was true that he would take me up to London to dine and do a theatre. Once or twice he bought me a pretty blouse, or a new hat, and this made the girls quite mad. I liked to see them mad! Though, after all, it was Charlie's own money, and not theirs. I was as saving as ever I could be in the housekeeping line. I counted the potatoes, weighed the groceries and the coal, and measured the milk; but I had a clean tablecloth every day—same as in India—and I used a lot of butter and cream, and three or four dozens of eggs in a week, because Charlie was so fond of my cakes and omelettes and soufflés. All this was scored up against me as a terrible crime! More than once the sisters reminded me that *I* had been penniless and a nobody, and that Charlie could have married dozens of girls with money and good family, and they both felt certain I would be the ruin of their brother—and then my baby was born!”

“Oh!” ejaculated her companion, to whom this information came as a surprise.

“But she only lived a week.”

“I am sorry,” and Helen slipped her hand into that of her friend, and pressed it in sympathy. “How very sad for you!”

Lorna Taylor made no reply, but her lips seemed

to tighten and twitch, and she stared out over the sea with a far-away expression in her grey-blue eyes. As she gazed she breathed very quickly, and was evidently labouring under some powerful and deep emotion. After a considerable pause, she continued:

"A few weeks later my husband caught a bad cold; he had lent his umbrella to one of his sisters, coming from the station, and as the rain was pouring down in sheets, he got wet to the skin. His cold turned into pneumonia—double pneumonia—and nothing could save him—*nothing!*" She sobbed, and as she put her hands to her face tears trickled through her slender fingers. Harvey Strong, who happened to be passing, glanced incredulously at her sudden outburst, then hastily looked away. As Helen murmured sympathy, she dried her tears, and said, with a sigh:

"Oh, if only I could have died with him; but I am as strong as a horse. I've never been sick in my life—except seasick. So there I was, left alone in England, for Charlie's people hated me and only wanted to get me out of the country. But, in spite of them, I would not stir, but waited until the stone was put up, and then I came away. They took my passage—the cheapest that they could hear of—but I paid for it myself. I have a small pension, and all that Charlie had in the world he left to *me*. So now there is my life. It is not, as you see, very *interesting*. I feel as if I were at the end of everything!"

"The end of everything—at twenty?" protested Helen.

"I wish I were seventy! Of course, I know that I am young, and by nature I am inclined to be

ever so gay and cheerful, but I can never be happy again."

"Do not say that. Believe me, you will have sunny days yet!"

"No," shaking her head. "I shall always, always miss my Charlie. The best of my life is over. I know that in one way I am an ungrateful girl, for I've still got my good, kind gran and my aunt. Grannie has given up her hotel and has gone back to her own country—to Chitari—where she has bought a house and some land, and seems happy and at home. Oh my! how glad they will be to welcome me, and how glad I shall be to see *them*! Also to see and smell the wood smoke and huka smoke in the bazaar. Dear old India—my native country! In England everything was different—so stiff, and cold, and precise—bah! And oh, the climate!" And she shuddered.

Occasionally the companions discussed their fellow passengers: poor little Mrs. Haines, for instance, who was so delicate, so helpless, and so poor. Then they would talk of Mr. Harvey Strong, who kept pointedly aloof, sitting far away in the bows, reading, writing, or smoking—and rarely opened his lips, except to the captain or to Mr. Hawkins, and who tramped the deck alone for hours. What an eccentric, rude young man!

"'Good morning' is the only sentence he has ever addressed to me," said Mrs. Taylor, in a voice of complaint. "Do you know, the other day I asked him why he never talked, and he said, 'When one has nothing to say, it is best to say nothing.' Wasn't he rude?"

"Yes; no doubt he is peculiar," admitted Helen.

"Yet Mr. Hawkins says he is remarkably clever—full of brilliant ideas—and will go far."

"Oh, I dare say he may be clever," assented Mrs. Taylor, "but what is the good? For that matter, Mr. Hawkins himself is clever. These clever people are not always agreeable. My! how he does talk, and lay down the law, in his hard, loud voice. Oh, it is like being at a lecture!"

"He's a greedy old thing," said Helen. "What an appetite! He should be made to pay for two passages. And, do you know, when the children have their chicken broth at eleven he comes down and asks for a cup?"

"Yes, I know; and he is a screw. He mends his old socks himself. I saw him darning away with a huge needle. He hinted that I might give him a helping hand. I told him he ought to be ashamed, coming out from home with socks like sieves, and I left him cobbling away. He won't put into the charity box, or venture sixpence on the sweep. He borrowed two francs from me at Marseilles, which I shall never see again!"

"Why don't you ask for it?"

"Oh, I don't like to. I'm sure he remembers it as well as I do, but does not wish to pay."

Mr. Richard Hawkins, for his part, did not at all approve of the friendship between these two young women, and one evening, as he and Helen were looking over the side, watching the phosphorescent light, his opinion found words.

"How can you forgather with that half-caste girl? If you were to see her people you would give her a wide berth."

"If I were to see her people, it would make no difference to me," replied Helen. "Anyway, Mrs. Taylor is fairer than *I* am!"

"Yes, at present," he rejoined with studied deliberation; "but give her ten years, and she will be the size of a feather bed, and as dark as your shoe! I ask you to look at the moons on her nails; she cannot get away from *them*!" he concluded triumphantly.

"I wonder why you are so prejudiced against what is called mixed blood. I don't understand."

"My dear young lady, you have not had time to do that yet. Now, I have been out in the East for twenty-four years, and I know the race, root and branch—a lazy, boneless, wasteful, useless lot, who combine the bad qualities of both races."

"Is not the weather lovely?" remarked Helen, anxious to make a diversion. "What a voyage we are having!"

"Ah, yes; *this* is the smooth side," rejoined Hawkins. "Scarcely even a swell. But wait till we are off Aden, and meet the monsoon full in our teeth. I expect this old tub is a confirmed and persistent roller."

"What is the monsoon?"

"The monsoon, my dear young lady, has to be realised before it is understood. It is the name for the rains and gales that keep India alive. They break in June and flood our parched-up country. Imagine, for six long months we have not had a drop of moisture, and how, when we sit gasping in the great heat, we welcome the vast, purple clouds that are gradually banking up west. Then the monsoon breaks,

with terrible thunderstorms and a torrential down-pour. Without these rains death would devastate the country."

The passage down the Red Sea was as smooth as glass; but when off Aden, precisely as prophesied, the *Paragon* encountered the full fury of the monsoon; in a moment, as if it had been lying in wait, it fell upon her. The passengers were enjoying an excellent tiffin—for the little captain was an epicure, and carried a "mug" cook. Right in the middle of a course of delectable curried prawns there came a roar of a mighty wind, a violent lurch, and all the tumblers, plates, forks, and knives slid to the floor, and it was only by frantic efforts that the company prevented themselves from joining them. This was the commencement of seven dreadful days. The old overladen *Paragon* struggled bravely against wind, squalls, and mountainous seas. It was exceedingly difficult to stand or walk, and people crawled about like sick flies, and cast anxious eyes on the clock and the barometer. On the second day of the gale, Helen met with a slight accident. She was attempting to climb the companion ladder, and clinging to the balustrade—despite the episode of the rat—when a tremendous wave struck the staggering *Paragon*. She heeled over to a perilous angle, and Harvey Strong, who had just reached the top of the stairs, was thrown off his balance, and hurled headlong down the steep descent, carrying Helen with him in his fall. He fell what is known as "soft"; the unfortunate girl had broken his fall. When he picked her up on the mat, although she tried to be a

stoic, her face was chalk white, and she gasped out hysterically :

"Oh, my ankle! But I don't think it's *much!*"

"I can't tell you how frightfully sorry I am!" he began, as soon as he had helped her on to the saloon lounge. "I'll go and fetch Mrs. Taylor, and she will find out what has happened."

Mrs. Taylor immediately appeared, staggering and holding on as she walked, and presently announced that Helen had sprained her ankle badly, and twisted her arm, which was likely to be one mass of bruises.

"Oh, lucky for you that *she* was there!" Turning to Strong: "Only for that you must have broken your neck. I suppose the captain has some few remedies on board—bandages and arnica——"

"Yes; I'll fetch them as quickly as I can," he said, and hurried away.

In a surprisingly short time Harvey Strong returned, bringing not only arnica and bandages, but several unexpected little comforts from his own cabin—lavender water, a fat cushion, and a rug—and between him and Mrs. Taylor they made the invalid pretty comfortable on the saloon lounge. No one could be more sympathetic and attentive than this hitherto morose young man. He undertook the post of medical attendant and nurse, for Lorna Taylor had her hands more than full with Mrs. Haines, and her children. John Crawford was also *hors de combat*; he was not actually seasick, but, as he announced :

"He could not stand knocking about. If he were to get a fall, it might be a bad business, and it would never do for both him and Helen to land in Bombay on crutches."

Mrs. Taylor and Harvey Strong assisted Helen to her cabin every evening, and subsequently the two girls agreed that he was really a nice fellow, and only wanted *knowing*. Unfortunately, there was not much time now in which to improve an acquaintance, but somehow he and Helen made the most of their opportunity. He brought her books and magazines, and explained to her, with elaborate care, that he had been "mugging" up for an exam, which was the real reason why he had come on a tramp steamer—simply to avoid society and go ahead with his work. He hoped to pass well and get a good post, as he really was most awfully keen about his profession. He further informed her that his people had been in India, and that he himself was born in the country and had a real affection for the so-called "Shiny."

"I am afraid, Miss Crawford, you will have rather a rough time when you first arrive. Everything will be so strange, and I expect you will be taken in on all sides. As to your father's treasure scheme, in my opinion there is nothing in it. Either the loot has been buried and all trace of it lost, or it's hidden away in the 'Tosha Khana' of some native prince. If such a treasure was likely to be discovered, don't you know that old Hawkins would have unearthed it years and years ago? Gold is his god!"

"Yes; I know that our chance is poor; in fact, it is scarcely worth the name. But father is always so sanguine; his hopes are never damped. He intends to go up, and prospect round Lucknow, and see if he can get hold of any of the descendants of his grand-uncle's retinue."

"Ah! he'll find dozens to say that their people

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have been in old Crawford's service—if he will only distribute a few rupees. But what about you, who cannot walk and get about?"

"Oh, Mrs. Taylor has kindly invited me to go home with her to Chitari."

"Oh, has she?" He paused reflectively. "Well, maybe it will be best, as a preliminary. I am sure you will find the Eurasians a rum lot, but very good-natured and hospitable. And if your father fails to find a clue—what then?"

"I really don't know. He never looks beyond the present, and he is wonderfully optimistic."

"Yes; I fancy that fellow Bird has been pouring oil upon the flame. I can't stand him! I must say I should like to have had a good square talk with your father, and discussed his plan of campaign, but the Bird sticks to him as if he were his perch. I have heard of Bird, and I know his type only too well—stone-broke, and always on the make."

"He can't make much out of Daddy, can he?"

"Oh, I'm not so sure. Your father strikes me as extraordinarily impulsive and generous."

"Yes; that he is, and as simple as a child!"

"Well, I must tell you, Miss Crawford, that that class have not much of a look-in out here."

"No; I suppose not—or anywhere else," she answered, with a sigh.

At last the battered, storm-beaten *Paragon* found herself at anchor in beautiful Bombay Harbour. Her funnels were white with salt; she had lost two boats, and most of her passengers still looked haggard and shaken. Within a remarkably short time the company had separated. Mr. Crawford, accompanied by

Captain Bird, departed up country to Lucknow ; Mrs. Haines, who had been met by her husband, had gone to Dēlhi ; James Hawkins, Esq., desired to take an intermediate ticket to his station, but *noblesse oblige*, and the poor martyr to *les convenances* was compelled to travel first class. Mrs. Taylor and Helen were seen off by Harvey Strong, who loaded them with fruit, papers, magazines, and various little comforts. He also extracted from the latter a promise to write and let him hear how she had borne the journey. And as the friends steamed out of Victoria Station, and she caught the last glimpse of a waving hat, Lorna Taylor looked over at her companion and said :

“It strikes me, Helen darling, that that was a lucky accident for you. You broke a fall, and glued a friendship !”

CHAPTER VIII

CRAWFORD AT LARGE

IT was with a curious and rather guilty sense of freedom and release that Crawford found himself climbing the great Bor Ghât in a second-class carriage, *en route* for Lucknow. He was leaving Helen and all restraint and advice behind him! His character of happy optimism and the treacherous facility of his tongue, had frequently involved him in sore trouble, out of which his wife and guardian angel had extricated him with more or less difficulty. When he had won her heart as a remarkably handsome young man, with an attractive personality and a touching tale of hard-hearted relatives and inexplicable failures, she had given him her hand and a considerable fortune. He was full of projects, enthusiasms, and activities, and for some years their married life was unusually happy. All went smoothly until Crawford, attacked by his old enemy—the spirit, or demon, of gambling—embarked on speculation. After a considerable period of feverish hopes, a few insignificant gains and serious losses, in one last mad effort to retrieve his luck, Crawford staked and lost almost every cent of his wife's money, with the exception of a hundred a year, and after a violent scene with her brother and sole surviving relative, he turned his face towards London as to a city of refuge. Here Elisabeth, his wife, undertook to drive the family coach, and to her

he humbly submitted his fate and future. Thanks to her exertion, he obtained a post, and placed himself upon an office stool without struggle or remonstrance.

Fortunately, his knowledge of figures was fair, he wrote a legible hand, and had the air and address of a gentleman—an agreeable and conversational gentleman. But he hated his job, although he had sense enough to realise that if he were to abandon it and allow things to slide, matters would become desperate. At least he had a comfortable little home, his pipe, his papers, and the society of his brother clerks. With these he posed as a triton among minnows, but all the same he had the sensation of being guided and kept up to the bit by a strong, though loving hand. The hand had relaxed in death—to his great grief and loss, but the slender fingers of his daughter had now taken the reins. She would remind him of office hours, urge him to wear a top coat, to answer letters, pay bills, and cut down his consumption of tobacco. Also, when he entertained his friends at a well-served little supper, and became excited and exaggerated, and talked big, or made rash promises and gave impulsive invitations, he would find Helen's eyes fixed upon him with the same warning and appealing look that he had so often encountered from her mother. Well, now there was an end to all this! For once he was on his own! He was liberated from Helen's interference, cautions, and economies—although she was one of the best and meant well.

By a great piece of good luck, Bird, his fellow-passenger, was also bound for Lucknow, where he was going to stay with some old friends before taking up his job—whatever that job might be. Bird had

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always evinced the keenest interest in the matter of the fortune, and had volunteered to come forward as an interpreter and assist in every way. More than once Bird had hinted at a sort of "partnership" in the great search; but, of course, this was nonsense. Crawford assured himself; he was not such an old fool as to allow Bird to hang on to him—no, by Jove! and he contemplated his companion, who lay extended on an opposite seat fast asleep. With all the animation wiped out of his face, how wizened and dried up Bird looked! Seen in repose, and as it were with a mask off, what a crafty countenance, with a long jaw, small pinched features, but a wide, broad forehead. Yes, there was no doubt that Bird had brains! What was Bird's job? What had been his life? He had served in the Army years ago; from that he had drifted into a racing stable; lately he had gone home on business, but swore that he could not stand his native climate, and had resolved to live and die in India. As Crawford meditated, in the cool comfort of discarded coat and collar, he stared out of the open window upon the scene which lay before him. The Bor Ghât is always beautiful in the rains; the purple mountain sides were seamed with silver cascades; the dry and barren low country had burst into abounding life; great pools reflected the blue sky as in a mirror. Sunset was coming; an Indian sunset in the rains presents one of the most gorgeous spectacles in the world. Everything seemed different from the India of Crawford's young days—the warm south, with its red earth, green paddy fields, mop-like palms, and English-speaking population; to him Northern India was an unknown country. His service had been in

Madras and Secunderabad, where even the Grass-cuts and Coolies spoke English; but up in this part of the world it was another language altogether, and in that respect he felt as helpless as a child.

Lucknow in the rains had the appearance of a plant that has been recently watered; the trees had taken on a new lease of life, the soft, wide roads were muddy, and the atmosphere was close and damp. The picturesque city of the tragic siege, though wearing its very best looks, was officially empty, for the world and his wife were absent in the hills. As soon as the travellers had descended from their railway carriage, Bird took command—he spoke Hindustani as glibly as a native—engaged a porter and a ticca gharry, in which they were rattled off to “The Majestic,” a cheap hotel situated between the bazaar and the cantonments. It might, as Bird declared, be cheap, but in the opinion of Crawford it had little else to recommend it. A long storied building, tiled, with a deep veranda, and standing back from the public road behind a wooden paling, “The Majestic” was kept by one Fernandez Lopez, a Portuguese from Goa, who greeted Captain Bird as if he were a long-lost friend. The rooms were dark and low, and smelt of white-wash; the matting was worn, the bedroom very bare; the table appointments deficient, but the food was abundant and well cooked.

After tiffin Crawford rested himself in a long cane lounge, whilst his companion gossiped with Lopez; their talk was of racing and betting. Later on, in the cool of the evening, the couple set forth to have what Bird called “a look round.” They made their way down to the river banks, and saw the Chutter Munzil,

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with its tapering minarets—once a palace, now a club, and in the distance the stately Martinière rearing its grey dome above the winding Gumti. As Bird pointed this out, he said :

“Look at that. There is the work of a fellow who was a soldier of fortune and a successful adventurer. Martin was the son of a cooper, who fought under Lally out here; then he took service with England; last of all, with the Nawab of Oude. When his fighting days were over he started cultivating indigo and lending money, and piled up an enormous fortune. He was offered a million for that very Martinière by a wealthy Rajah; he died before it was finished, and is buried in the basement—it is his tomb !”

“Yes,” said Crawford; “a fine monument, and advertisement to other soldiers of fortune. Well, now I want to see the old residency.”

“Oh, yes, there’s lots to see — Dilkousha and Wingfield Park, and all that. But your first trip will be to make a bee-line to the Gorrah Bazaar and look up your friend Kadir Bux. And now I think we had better be making tracks for the hotel and dinner. After dinner I shall go over to my friends the Ranns. They live in a bungalow not far from the hotel; rattling good sort, both of them, though not society highfliers.”

The following morning Bird conducted his protégé into the mazes of the bazaar; the streets were narrow, crowded, lined with little shops selling a variety of articles, from grain and copper cooking pots to gold native ornaments and silver-thread embroideries; to Crawford the damp heat was over-

powering—although it was but ten o'clock. After many inquiries and exasperating delays they discovered the Lal Khoti, and found, to their disappointment, that Kadir Bux was not at home. His son, an intelligent young Mahomedan, informed them his father was in Moradabad visiting relations, and would be away for a couple of weeks. The young man and Bird had a long and lively colloquy, the gist of which, being interpreted to Crawford, was—that any friend from his honour the General would be *more* than welcome to his father. Apparently Fenton's name was a magic one with which to conjure in the family of Kadir Bux. The young man took Crawford's address, and said that his father would certainly wait upon his lordship as soon as ever he returned.

"Now what is to be done?" demanded Crawford, as they turned homewards and threaded their way through the bazaar with its rows and rows of little shops, its hawkers, merchants, European soldiers, coolie women, dogs, ponies, and oppressive smell of spices, coconut oil, and huka smoke.

"Sit tight," rejoined Bird. "You can't go tearing about the country in this sweltering heat. You will find no cheaper billet than 'The Majestic' at four rupees a day. Whilst you are waiting you can see the sights, take stock, pick up a little of the language, and," as if offering an overwhelming favour, "I'll introduce you to the Ranns!"

That evening Captain Bird betook himself and his baggage over to the Ranns' bungalow, and Crawford dined alone. The punkah had broken down, and the moist heat was almost unbearable. Worse

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still, the lights had attracted armies of flying white ants, who massed in legions round the lamps, made the air dense with their wings—which wings they presently shed like leaves and, transformed into caterpillars, crawled over the cloth. Crawford had forgotten this horrible experience, common to the rains, and the visitation put him off his dinner. Presently he got up and went and flung himself down in a chair in the veranda, aloof from the other guests—railway men, business people—with whom, strange to say, he had no wish to converse, and sat listening to the rain pattering on the banana leaves, the whirring of the tree frogs, and the distant hum of the bazaar. He felt bored, lonely, and profoundly disgusted with the insect world, and began to regret that he had ever left England. India, in his opinion, was no country for a white man!

The next morning, which was beautifully fine, his ideas had modified. After an excellent breakfast of coffee, fish, and fruit, and a couple of cigarettes, he came to the conclusion that Lucknow was not such a bad place after all! Presently he received a visit from Bird, accompanied by Mr. Rann, a tall, broad-shouldered, slouching individual, with a huge red moustache, close-set, small eyes, a large mouth, and fiercely prominent teeth; somehow his mouth and teeth and the shape of his jaw imparted a wolfish expression to his countenance. His clothes were well cut but shabby; he wore an enormous mushroom topee, and a pair of shapeless tennis shoes; altogether his appearance was not particularly distinguished, and yet when he opened his mouth and spoke, you realised that Rann was a gentleman! Something of the

public schoolboy and cricketer still clung to this somewhat battered specimen of an Englishman in India. He had come over to pay a visit of ceremony, and said, as he offered a large hand :

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Crawford. My friend Bird has been telling me about you. The place is mighty dull and empty now ; all the brass hats are in the hills, but my wife and I prefer the quiet time—and we are not fashionable people. She has asked me to tell you that she will be very pleased if you will come to tea at four o'clock."

Crawford accepted the invitation with effusion ; it would make a nice break in the long, long Indian day. And after a little talk about the monsoon weather, the white ants, the journey from Bombay, Rann took his departure. As soon as his tall, shambling figure was out of sight Captain Bird proceeded to describe him :

"Rann is a queer fish," he began, "but a rattling good sort all the same. No one knows much about him, but he comes of an old border family. He made a start as a contractor in Calcutta, and after many ups and downs came to most frightful grief—partly through swindlers. After that he had a serious illness, and was sent for a sea trip to Australia, and coming back on board ship he had the good luck to meet Mrs. Rann on her way to England. She was a widow, with a good bit of money, and had been, I believe, a musical star. Rann made love to her and diverted her journey to India. They were married in Calcutta, and have lived in this country ever since. It may seem funny, but she *loves* it. They have a small tea plantation up in the hills, which he looks

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after now and then ; but a certain part of the year they spend in Lucknow. Rann is a first-class billiard player, and picks up a few rupees at cards. On the whole the couple seem to have all they want. She is a capital housekeeper, and they do you uncommonly well. I am a P.G., of course. If they had another spare room they might take you in ; but I am sure, as my friend, you will have the run of the house, and you are not badly off as you are ! The company may be a rough and tumble lot, but there is no nonsense about the food ! ”

CHAPTER IX

MR. AND MRS. RANN

PUNCTUALLY at four o'clock Crawford, having invested himself in a smart new suit and a fashionable tie, accompanied Bird over to the Ranns' bungalow, which was within a short distance from the hotel. It was a large, rambling building, shabby and dilapidated, and gave one the impression that it was shrinking from publicity and did not wish to be seen. The garden presented an array of meagre caladiums and straggling geraniums in pots; the drive was full of ruts; the broken trellis work in front of the porch was partly veiled in the common or garden "railway" creeper—the whole surroundings wore a dismal air of lifelessness and forlorn neglect. What a contrast to the interior of the bungalow! Here a smart Portuguese butler, in a snow-white suit and an ostentatious gold watch-chain, received the visitors and ushered them into the drawing-room, where they found Mrs. Rann, known to her friends as "Ruby."

Mrs. Rann was dark and handsome—but decidedly too stout. Her age was uncertain, her figure was mature; but her eyes were young, magnetic and active, and she turned them about a good deal as she talked. The room was surprisingly elegant: a vast sofa and various inviting arm-chairs were covered with a pretty bright cretonne. There

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were many enormous silk cushions and lamp-shades of a deep rose tint. These made an admirable background for Ruby Rann's pale, clear-cut face; also there was a *souffçon* of Oriental perfume in the air and a general sense of Eastern indolence. It was abundantly evident that if Mrs. Rann had left the stage she still retained something of the *sens de théâtre*, and had arranged a setting that was well adapted to her particular personality. John Crawford, misled by the neglected garden and squalid entourage, was amazed to find such elegance and affluence within. Mrs. Rann's toilette was another surprise—she wore a charming cream silk tea gown and a string of pearls; diamond rings sparkled on the plump hand she extended to the stranger as she greeted him with a radiant smile:

"Oh, Mr. Crawford, it is *so* good of you to come over in this informal way, and it is a pleasure to me to see a new face! One does get deadly tired of the same old lot, day after day. Ah, here is tea," as the smart Goanese appeared, bearing an equally smart tea equipage. "Now, you must sit beside me on the sofa," patting it invitingly with her hand, "and tell me all the latest news; you come from London?"

"Yes, but I was not much in the way of fashionable intelligence. We lived very quietly—quite out of the world."

"But I suppose you went sometimes to a theatre, Mr. Crawford?"

"Oh, yes, pretty often—to the cheap places."

And then she proceeded to question him particularly with regard to some recent plays. Her eyes

played a prominent share in her conversation, and with these same handsome eyes she took delicate stock of this new acquaintance.

On Crawford's side, although he admired the lady and was flattered by her civilities, he knew in his bones that she was not quite of the same class as her husband, which was a fact! Mrs. Rann was clever and intuitive, and had considerable social gifts; for instance, a delightful, if slightly worn, contralto, that could touch her audience to tears; moreover, she could relate an anecdote, or tell a story in a dramatic manner that would keep the same audience enthralled. It was she who was really the head of the house and what is known as "the grey mare." She shielded Rann when he had had too much whisky, and managed to keep him more or less straight and passably presentable. She was a capable manager—no one would recognise the same lady in her early morning toilet, a shapeless overall and roomy shoes, as she hustled about the house, dusted, and fed the fowls, and even cooked at an oil stove in the back veranda!

Mrs. Rann declared that she had fallen under the spell of India, and enjoyed the nice, lazy, go-as-you-please sort of life which they led, but she worked pretty hard all the same. Her women friends were few and far between, but she had a considerable contingent of what she called "her boys"—subalterns, assistants, and clerks. With these she went out driving or boating, and assembled them around her well-spread board as often as they were pleased to come.

The little party at tea were presently joined by

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several young men and a rather faded lady who arrived in a victoria under the porch and was introduced by Mrs. Rann as "my cousin, Mrs. Mortimer." There was nothing specially remarkable about her, beyond her shamelessly transparent blouse and a high whinnying laugh. Most of the company appeared to be intimate, and there was a good deal of chaff and gossip—in short, a sort of infectious gaiety that appealed to the somewhat bored John Crawford, who felt exceedingly reluctant when the clock struck six, warning him that it was time for him to take his departure. As he rose to go he received a very pressing invitation from his hostess to come over and dine the following day and take "pot luck," and Mr. Rann himself escorted him back to "The Majestic" and asked him some questions respecting his tastes.

"Do you take any interest in racing?" he inquired.

"No, not much; not since I was a subaltern in India and got badly bit."

"Do you play billiards?"

"Yes, once; I haven't had a cue in my hand for ages."

"And what about cards?"

"Ah, yes. I like cards, I must confess."

"Bridge?"

"I'm afraid I only play in a footling sort of way."

"Poker?"

"Yes, but I've almost forgotten the game, and I never had the nerve to bluff. I am a poor man," explained Crawford. "For a good while back, ever since I lost my money, I have been working in an

office, and that sort of life does not give one much time for billiards, or racing, or cards."

"That's true!" assented his companion. "But you've lots of time *now*; you are your own master and, after dinner to-morrow night, we will see how much you remember; and I'll take you on at a game of poker!"

CHAPTER X

HOSPITALITY AT THE "HUT"

THE pot-luck dinner at the "Hut" proved to be both appetising and agreeable—the menu, appointments, service, and liquor left nothing to be desired. Mrs. Rann, in a black gown glittering with jet, presided with much grace. The red lamp-shades illuminated her clear-cut, clever and animated face. Besides Crawford and Bird, among the other guests was a slim, fair, youngish woman, with a high piercing voice; she wore a smart, extremely *décolleté*, slightly soiled evening-gown, and appeared to be on intimate terms with the Ranns, who addressed her as "Joey." The lady was made known to Crawford as Mrs. Boyd; next to her, and on Mrs. Rann's right hand, sat a square, stout, red-faced man, Mr. Parrott of the cement works, undoubtedly an important and an honoured guest. Whatever he said was listened to with profound respect, and now and then his hostess's conversation sank into a confidential whisper.

Two other places were filled by pale, washed-out youths: one, whose name was Tombs, was a subaltern in a regiment quartered at Cawnpore; the other an engineer on the railway—boys who imagined themselves to be seeing life, and enjoyed Mrs. Rann's dainty little dinners and her emotional songs, generally succeeded by a game of bridge at five rupees a hundred.

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It was abundantly evident to Crawford that he represented "the odd one out"; all the others appeared to know one another well, and talked, chaffed and gossiped through excellent courses of soup, pomphret, gram-fed mutton, cheese soufflé and ice pudding, followed by dessert, coffee and liqueurs. For once Crawford sat tongue-tied. Among the surrounding babel he could not, as he wished to, have found a hearing. After one or two inquisitive glances, as far as he was concerned, the company took no further interest in either himself or his plans. They were well accustomed to see strange faces at the Ranns' hospitable table, mere birds of passage who appeared for a few days and then vanished into limbo. Bird talked a good deal, and bragged about his trip home. He informed Mr. Parrott that he had come out in the P. & O., and then threw a wink at Crawford, who had listened aghast at such barefaced lying. Mrs. Boyd also supported the ball of conversation; she appeared to be a lady of easy manners, who threw pellets of bread at the two young men, rested her skinny elbows on the table, and chatted continuously. As for the host, he was entirely absorbed in his dinner and his stiff whisky pegs. His wife murmured confidentially to Parrott, but occasionally turned her attention to her left-hand guest and gave him a sufficiency of sweet speeches and soft glances to—so to speak—"go on with." As he sat in the unusual rôle of audience, he heard general abuse and ridicule of the authorities; Society had the whole of its laundry figuratively washed then and there!

According to Mrs. Boyd and Bird, there was

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scarcely an honest man or a respectable woman in the whole of Lucknow; everyone had their price! And then Mrs. Boyd, as her glass was replenished, became more particular, and narrated several scandals and stories that came under the name of *risqué*, and this without the smallest embarrassment or reserve! Undoubtedly the lady knew her public, who listened to her stories with greedy ears. As the laugh, after a particularly spicy anecdote, died away, Mrs. Rann pushed back her chair and made a move. Passing by Crawford, she tapped his sleeve lightly and said:

"Don't be too long, but come into the drawing-room, and I will sing to you! I think you care for music—I see it in your *eyes*!"

The dinner table broke up with unexpected suddenness; everyone seemed to be in a hurry to disperse. John Crawford's heart had been made merry with wine, he had not eaten such a satisfactory meal for many a day and, with a feeling of great well-being, he sat beside his hostess on a large sofa, whilst over her coffee cup her mesmeric eyes searched him narrowly, and he was compelled to open his heart and talk. By degrees he imparted to her how he had come out to India on some business by which he hoped to make his fortune.

"Yes," she nodded; "we are in that secret—the little Canary Bird has given you away!"

Crawford started upright.

"Oh, it's quite all right," she continued composedly. "We are as safe as the grave; we live, as you may note, entirely remote from the big world, civil or military. This house is *full* of secrets! We'll keep yours, honour bright, and possibly I"—

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and here she laid a plump hand upon his—"may be able to help you."

She had taken a fancy to this handsome, middle-aged gentleman, with his clear and candid eyes, well-bred air, and the simplicity and enthusiasm of a youth in his teens.

"Of course, your search sounds like a fairy tale, but there may be something in it. Indian soil is full of buried gold and lost and forgotten treasures."

"Yes, I know that," he assented, "and I have hopes. My granduncle is dead this forty years—not so *very* long ago."

"There's something in that," agreed Mrs. Rann. "I believe members of the Begum's family are still in existence. They live at a place called Monapore, a long way from here, and I should say that they have something to tell about the Crawford fortune—that is to say, the gold and the celebrated jewels."

"But I understand that he quarrelled with them, and would not allow one of them inside his place."

"No doubt they tried to poison him!—in India poison has achieved the dignity of an art. You might have been poisoned at dinner just now, and not a soul would have been the wiser, except your enemy and the cook. It is a mere rubbing your plate with the leaf of the datura, and the result leaves no trace. But do let us talk of something pleasanter than poison. Tell me about your girl—where is she?"

"She ~~has~~ gone to stay with a friend in Chitari, until I can get on the track and set to work in earnest. I have great hopes of Kadir Bux."

"Is your daughter interested in this treasure hunt?"

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He hesitated a moment and then replied :

"Only in a faint-hearted fashion. Her mother was dead against the scheme, but she was always practical and inclined to be pessimistic, whereas I am a visionary and full of hope! The craze to discover this fortune, which is really *my* fortune, has been in my mind for years—it runs like a fever in the blood. Sometimes my temperature is high, sometimes it is normal, but the fever is always there."

"And the temperature, I take it, is very high at present?"

"It is; something seems to push me on, and no matter how many setbacks and disappointments I meet I still have faith."

"Ah, I am not surprised at that!" she rejoined. "You have such faithful eyes. Now I am going to sing to you," and she rose and moved towards the piano, and in another moment her delightful contralto was filling the room.

Crawford was enchanted; this sweet, emotional voice touched his very heart strings and made him think of his lost Elisabeth—Elisabeth, whose presence seemed to be brought nearer to him through this beautiful woman at the piano. For half an hour he hung over the instrument, begging for song after song, until at last the lady declared that she was hoarse. Meanwhile, the room had emptied, and through a reed screen he caught sight of a card party in a large adjoining apartment.

"Let us go and see what they are doing in the Den," suggested Mrs. Rann as she pushed back the jingling partition, and they entered.

Parrott, Mrs. Boyd, the subaltern from Cawn-

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pore and Rann were playing bridge with solemn intentness, whilst Bird and a youth called "Tommy" looked on. Crawford noticed that "Joey," now silent, played with intensity. Her fixed smile had disappeared, her expression was cold, calculating and ruthless as she scored trick after trick. At last Rann, who was her partner, gave a loud, boisterous laugh as he exclaimed :

"Grand Slam ! By Jove, Parrott, your luck is dead out. Where is your mascot, the little brass god ? "

"I forgot him," he answered in a surly tone, whilst Mrs. Rann bent over and examined his score.

Crawford also noticed that the subaltern from Cawnpore looked whiter than ever ; great drops of perspiration trickled down his face as he added up a long line of figures. Presently the party broke up. Parrott and his partner were heavy losers, and Parrott had curtly refused to take his revenge. Bird and Tommy declined to cut in and, after the appearance of whisky pegs and cheroots, the company dispersed. Was it his own vivid imagination, or was it the result of a two-fingered peg, that made Crawford suppose that Mrs. Rann had pressed his hand at parting ? At any rate she had said :

"Come over here whenever you like, we shall *love* to have you ! "

Simple, unsophisticated Crawford made his way back to his bare room and hard bed in an unusual and exalted condition. What an evening ! How strange, how unusual the whole experience ! Outside, a great rambling, shabby old bungalow, standing in a neglected garden, and so reserved was its aspect

that it almost looked as if it were uninhabited—or even haunted! There were no animals to be seen, not even a chicken; the servants' quarters were out of sight, and its situation, at the end of a *cul-de-sac*, was isolated and obscure. Once inside, all was different: here were taste, luxury and no lack of either guests or money; somehow the whole establishment suggested something incomprehensible. Mrs. Rann had imparted to him that their mode of living was queer and unusual.

"We are not a bit like ordinary Indian folk, who are always rushing about; we don't want to know them, and they don't want to know us. We are a cheery lot in the "Hut," and when we require a change we go up to our little old place in the hills."

Certainly the Ranns and their ménage were different from what he remembered of people in Secunderabad and Bangalore in his youth; there was a recklessness and unconvention about the Rann ménage, but no doubt times had changed. Mrs. Rann was strikingly handsome—what an entrancing voice—and then she was so frank and confidential, so friendly and above-board. But somehow he felt a conviction that she and Elisabeth would never have coalesced—Elisabeth was a bit of a Puritan, and disliked modern women who smoked and drank whisky pegs; and as for Mrs. Boyd's stories—she would have risen from the table and escaped. "But after all," he said to himself, "why not enjoy and take whatever is pleasant that comes in your way? 'Make the most of life'; this was Mrs. Rann's creed and, as he laid his head on his hard coir pillow, his mind was full of her sayings—and her songs!

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The little dinner was preliminary to others. During the week which followed Crawford spent a considerable part of his time at the "Hut," listening to Mrs. Rann's ballads and stories, and playing cards. On the first occasion, urged by Rann, he—greatly daring—had ventured on poker. As the game began, it seemed to come back—he had had a good deal of practice in the States and in Canada, and was by no means the tyro that Rann had anticipated. To that gentleman's disgust and secret exasperation, he found that "the fellow knew all about it," and actually rose from the table the winner of ninety rupees! Unfortunately this proved to be a Pyrrhic victory for Crawford. Having tasted success, like other gamblers, he thirsted for more, and hence his ultimate downfall. Bridge was preferred to poker, and at bridge he would win one evening, on the next would lose heavily. It was some small comfort to know that Parrott was in the same boat, but then Parrott was a moneyed man, and had a car and a fine pukka bungalow in Dilkousha. Joey Boyd was also unlucky, though when she played with Rann they generally won. The boys ventured but little; others came too, and played with feverish recklessness for high stakes. It was not often that these young men rose from the bridge table as winners. The games most favoured were bridge and "chimmy"—chemin de fer. Sometimes there were as many as ten players and several tables. Strange to say, Mrs. Rann never took a hand—evidently she considered that she had fulfilled her part in providing the company with a most excellent dinner and a generous supply of pegs and cigars. She moved slowly round the room,

overlooked various hands, and occasionally stooped to whisper sympathy and condolence. If the truth were known, the lady had a code of signals which proved very useful to her confederate and husband. At the end of a week of delightful evenings, stimulating society and absorbing play, Crawford found that the hundred pounds which he had brought to Lucknow was rapidly slipping through his fingers. He had lost nearly sixty pounds! But like a true gambler, he lived in hope of its recovery. These hopes were always buoyed up by Mrs. Rann and Bird. The latter would say :

"By Jove, my dear fellow, I *never* saw such rotten luck. But you will get it all back in one big pot!"

During this sensational week Crawford had exchanged letters with Helen. She wrote that Mrs. Taylor's grandmother, Mrs. MacNab, had given her a warm welcome, that she was enjoying herself greatly. The station they lived in was quite small, raised on a sort of plateau above the plains. There were not many Europeans, but there was a nice little club, and tennis, lovely gardens and flowers. Mrs. MacNab kept cows and poultry—it was a kind of Indian farm. She hoped he would have good news to send her soon and that he was well.

For his own part, he had written to Helen that he was obliged to wait on the return of Kadir Bux, but meanwhile had made acquaintance with some nice people with whom he dined pretty often, and he would keep her well posted as to his plans. There was not a word in this letter about card-playing, nor Mrs. Rann, the siren, who occasionally took him out for drives about the city in the afternoon; once in a

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hired Napier car they went far afield, occasionally in a smart victoria, with a pair of long-tailed Arabs, whose more leisurely pace enabled him to admire the suburbs with clumps of mango and orange trees and hedges of scarlet hibiscus. She talked with him sympathetically of his hopes and prospects; she imparted to him the history of her own life, not a word of which was true; she also discussed her husband and her associates with easy freedom. Rann, poor fellow, had met with frightful losses and disappointments with regard to money. He had once held a fine position—now he preferred to shut out all that reminded him of his grand days! And he was happy enough with a good cook, a game of cards, an occasional day's racing—and "his little grey home in the hills!" "Birdie" was an old friend—further particulars were not disclosed. Joey Boyd was a much ill-used woman; the world had treated her vilely, and the result was an embittered creature. No one would believe, to look at her now, that once upon a time she was the beauty of Simla. Four years ago there was a grand crash at home, and she had come out because she hated all her own people—and she adored India! Joey had a certain amount of money and was, as he could see, quite mad about bridge. She had a wonderful card brain, and could hold her own with the best. She was also a first-rate tennis player; there she made friends with the boys, and brought them into the "Hut" to dine and have a little game.

"You know the good-looking boy we call Jacko—he is crazy about cards. Poor fellow, he tells me that he actually counts the hours to when he will

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be free to come to the 'Hut.' He is in the Hubble Bubble office, and considered clever; his people are what is called 'county,'¹ and I believe some of the big-wigs have taken him up; and now," as they thundered down the porch of "The Majestic," "I must set you down, for I have a little shopping to do in the bazaar. Remember, we shall expect you to dinner as usual. You really *must* have your revenge!" And, with a wave of her hand, she was driven away.

CHAPTER XI

A SHOCK

As Crawford arrived at the hotel he was met by one of the hotel servants, who announced with an air of unusual respect :

"Kadir Bux, butler to General Fenton Sahib, awaits your honour's pleasure."

"Show him in," said Crawford, as he hurried into the frowsy sitting-room. Presently the khitmahar reappeared, accompanied by a bearded, dignified Mahomedan, who was secretly surprised to find a friend of his lord in such humble quarters. Fortunately for Crawford, Kadir Bux spoke and understood a little English. His first speech was to make anxious inquiries respecting his General Sahib, and when he had been assured of his health and welfare by Crawford—who artfully pretended to a closer acquaintance and intimacy than was really the case, he added :

"I am a very poor man, Kadir Bux; not like your General Sahib; I cannot afford grand hotels and carriages, but if I succeed in the business which has brought me to India, and succeed through your assistance, I will make your fortune."

To this magnificent promise Kadir Bux made no reply beyond a profound salaam.

"My granduncle's name is still remembered by old people," he continued.

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"That is so," gravely assented Kadir Bux.

"He had many retainers; can you put me on the track of one of these?"

"Truly, it is a long time since Jan Crawford died. It is a man's lifetime; but folks come and go in Lucknow City from all parts of the country; they flow to and fro like the sea. I will make inquiries to-night in the bazaar, where old people are to be dealt with; there is not an hour to lose. With the Sahib's permission I will now take my leave"; so saying, he salaamed and departed.

"That is a straight man!" remarked Bird, who had just encountered Kadir Bux in the veranda. (How he had discovered his visit to the hotel must ever remain an unsolved mystery.) Nevertheless, there he was on the spot, a little breathless, and extremely keen to hear particulars of the recent interview. "If anyone *can* give you a helping hand," he said, "that fellow will do it! Your having a good chit from his old Sahib is an enormous help. He will work for his Sahib's sake—as you will see!"

That night Crawford remained at the hotel; his nerves were all on edge; he did not feel up to dining at the "Hut" and listening to Mrs. Boyd's strident laugh, and the cheap, foolish jokes of her satellites. He had no desire for music, or even bridge; he wished to sit and confer with John Crawford; he had a conviction he was standing on the edge of grave events, and must keep a firm hold upon his nerves and his exchequer. After dinner he sat out in the veranda looking at the stars, listening to the whirring of the tree frogs, and the distant thrumming of a tom-tom.

Presently a burly figure caused a loud creaking in an adjoining chair; it was a stout newcomer, whom Crawford had remarked at dinner, and who, in his opinion, looked like a commercial traveller. As a rule Crawford held himself severely aloof from the other guests—they were mostly business men, Anglo-Indians to the marrow of their bones; but to-night he suffered himself to be drawn into conversation with the stranger, who, after a little talk about the heat and the insects, said:

"What line are you in?"

"No particular line; I am waiting about for a few days; I have some business to attend to."

"Oh, business, I see. Well, I'm travelling in cotton for a big Parsee firm, and turn up here once in three months. I am an *habitué*; I come to this old shack pretty often, for though the beds are awful, the food is top-hole."

"Yes," assented Crawford.

"I expect you find it pretty dull having nothing to do all day. You mustn't judge of Lucknow as it is at present. This is the slack season; everyone who could has cleared out."

"So I should think."

"Are you fond of cards? Would you like a game of *ecarté*?"

"Not to-night, thank you; I have rather a head."

"I suppose you haven't heard by chance of the gambling hell that flourishes in these parts?"

"What! A gambling hell?" repeated Crawford. "Oh, no."

"But oh, yes; the owners come here in the off season for three or four months, and manage to keep

on the blind side of the police." Then, in answer to a signal from a figure in a doorway, he rose and said: "All right, I'm coming." Turning to Crawford he explained: "It's a chap from the Cawnpore Mills who wants to take me on at billiards," and he hurried away.

A gambling hell; could he possibly mean the "Hut?" Certainly there was a good deal of high play there—a large amount of money was lost and won; but it was all conducted with great decorum; everything went as smoothly and as pleasantly as if it were in a private house. And so it *was* a private house! Parrott had disappeared within the last few days, but his place had been taken by one Mund, a burly, bald-headed man, a road contractor, who had apparently a long purse. The Cawnpore subaltern was also missing—he had confessed to Crawford that he was "stone broke." "Jacko," however, still held on, as well as two cheery young men from a factory. One of these had won considerably; everything was thoroughly on the square, and the commercial traveller was, no doubt, referring to some native gambling den. While he was having chota-hazri the next morning a gharri drove up under the porch, out of which descended the majestic form of Kadir Bux.

"I have news for your honour," he began without preamble.

"Oh, by Jove, have you?" exclaimed Crawford, starting to his feet.

"I heard last night that there is a very old man, still living, who was once in Jan Crawford's service. He is of great age—life hangs by a thread. He is to be found in a village not far from Shahjehanpore,

where he lives with his grandson. He is so feeble that he may die any day; therefore it were well the Sahib should lose no time in visiting him."

"Yes, yes," assented Crawford; "I will get ready and go at once."

"That is good! I will arrange to send a telegram to prepare the family for your honour's visit, and also to order a gharry to meet you at Shahjehanpore Station; it is but one hour from Lucknow, and there is a good train at one o'clock."

"Thank you, Kadir Bux, and I will take a gentleman with me to interpret."

"Yes, that will be best."

"Can you tell me anything more about this old man?"

"No, sir; not much. He was in your uncle's service for many years, and before he died the protector of the poor gave him land, and, it is said, money. He must be nearly one hundred years of age."

"Is that all you can tell me?"

"That is so, sir. Jan Crawford did not dwell much in these parts. He only came here for races, and Tamashas, and such like; he dwelt farther south, where he lived on his own lands and kept great state."

"I suppose no whisper ever came to your ears as to what happened to his money?"

"Truly, there have been many whispers, Sahib; but after forty years these whispers cease. I have heard it said that much of the money and jewels were given to the Begum's family, and are hidden away in the treasure house under their palace, whence they will never again see the light. I have heard also that

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Jan Crawford's own gold was buried in a well; without a doubt there is a great store somewhere, and I trust your honour may be able to find it." Then, with another profound salaam, Kadir Bux returned to his gharri and was whirled away.

As soon as he had departed Crawford wrote a hasty chit which he dispatched to Captain Bird, begging him to come over to tiffin, and join him in the great adventure.

At two o'clock the couple left Lucknow for Shahjehanpore, Bird having consented to accompany Crawford as his interpreter. On the journey the wizened little man, who was looking particularly yellow and dissatisfied, put various searching questions to his companion; he also threw out some plain hints—indeed, more than hints—to the effect that he expected to be handsomely remunerated for his trouble as guide and interpreter. For reply Crawford was lavish in his promises; promises without any firmer foundation than the air itself! But these apparently satisfied little Bird, who presently relapsed into a moody silence and a series of cheap cigarettes.

Meanwhile Crawford stared out of the carriage window and surveyed the country through which they were passing. How different from the south! Here were immense forest trees, vast stretches of sugar cane, stone-built, red-tiled villages, and at the small wayside stations natives of a different type to that of the sleek, dark Madrassi; these were tall, stalwart, bearded fellows, the descendants of a hardier, fiercer race. Undoubtedly it was among such that his adventurous relative had passed the greater part of his life.

At Shahjehanpore Station they were met by a gharri, drawn by two starveling white ponies, and their driver, having received instructions from Bird, started off for the open country. Crawford and his companion were rattled along a muddy red road for more than half an hour, until they arrived on the outskirts of a large village. After some inquiries they made their way through narrow alleys and pools of water to the abode of the principal resident. He lived within a courtyard entirely surrounded by buildings; one side was occupied by the family dwelling, the other three by cart, cattle sheds, and the granary. In a very short time the gharri and the visitors were invested by a swarm of men, women, and children, and undoubtedly their arrival had been anticipated, for a tall man, with a white beard, an embroidered grey cloth coat and green turban, ceremoniously advanced to receive them, and immediately entered into an animated colloquy with Captain Bird. Subsequently he preceded them up some steep, rickety stairs, along an equally rickety veranda, into a low, almost bare, apartment. Here were two charpoys and a vast, red wooden press—nothing more. After an expressive pause Bird turned to Crawford and, speaking with evident effort, said :

"I am awfully sorry—I know you will be disappointed; this fellow tells me—that the old man is *dead!*"

CHAPTER XII

POOR JACKO

CRAWFORD was so staggered by this announcement that he collapsed upon a charpoy and stared at his informant with a blank and stupefied expression.

"He died over a year ago," continued Bird; "so you see that news does not travel quickly in these parts. This fellow, who is his grandson, and has succeeded to his house and land, says that the old man must have been nearly a hundred years of age, and that during the latter part of his life he was blind and imbecile."

Here the native interposed with a long speech in sonorous Urdu. When he had concluded, Bird said :

"Said Houssain asks me to tell you that he is proud to see the nephew of the great Jan Crawford under his roof. His grandfather was in his service for years, and though hard and tyrannical, he could be generous, and when he died he left his servant the lands about this village. His grandfather had been a soldier, and fought in the Mutiny. Are there any questions you would like to ask him?"

"Oh, yes; lots. Ask him whereabouts my grand-uncle lived?"

"He says that he wandered about a good deal; by all accounts, when he was young, in Oude, Lower Bengal, and the Central Provinces. But it was in the Central Provinces he made his home, and owned

large tracts of land—now in the hands of the Government.”

“And what about all the gold?”

In reply to this question the Mahomedan shrugged his broad shoulders and shook his head. His reply, being interpreted, was :

“People like to talk of gold and treasure—and, sometimes, it is all talk. There is no true tale respecting Jan Crawford’s money and jewels. His wife was a Begum, and doubtless the riches were restored to her family.”

“But the crores and lakhs of rupees that Jan Crawford had himself accumulated—what of them?” inquired Bird.

“Doubtless they are buried in some old building. Of this—when he was in his right mind—my grandfather would never speak. If he knew aught—he was dumb !”

“But did he not sometimes talk of his old Sahib?”

“Oh, yes, many a time. He was with him till the last. For months before his death he had lost the power of speech and the use of his hands from a stroke, and it was terrible to see him struggling to make himself understood. There was something on his mind, much that he desired to say ; but whatever it was, it has passed with him into silence. It was a great grief to my grandfather to see his lord thus helpless and distraught.”

“No doubt,” said Bird, “it had to do with his land and his money and all the Begum’s treasures. Apparently they will never be heard of. This is but a poor tale for my friend—the heir of your patron—who has come all the way over the ‘Black Water’ to

seek for his uncle's fortune—and there is no clue to what has befallen it?"

"No; have we not wearied the old man with our questions? But it was as if talking to a stone wall."

"And have you no ideas of your own?"

"What are ideas, Sahib? Truly, of little value. I am sorry for this gentleman, the descendant of our patron, who has come all this way for nothing. Things are soon forgotten in India, especially when relating to your people—who pass and pass and pass, and return not. As to the riches of Jan Crawford, I should say, search in the Central Provinces; it was there he lived of late years, shut up among his household—a strange man, and a stranger to his own people. I have here something that once belonged to him, which he gave to my grandfather; it is a walking-stick he always used when he became aged and infirm. It is stout, but of no value; I will give it to the Sahib."

Forthwith he strode across the room—which shook during his transit—and flung open the great press; this appeared to be crammed with a mass of heterogeneous objects, including clothes and cooking utensils. After a somewhat prolonged search he returned, carrying in one hand a thick bamboo stick with a brass ferrule, and in the other a battered tin box with broken hinges.

"Behold, herein are papers," he said, handing it to Crawford; "but I doubt if they be of any value to your lordship. Still, the Sahib should possess them. It is all that remains of our patron—save our gratitude—and his honoured name."

Crawford opened the box and gave a cursory

glance at its dusty contents; everything was seemingly written in Hindustani, and on very coarse yellow paper. After a little more conversation and the usual conventional compliments between Bird and the Mahomedan, the visitors took their leave, made their way through the thronged courtyard, got into the gharri, and were driven back to Shahjehanpore.

As they rattled along Crawford could hear the frogs in the marshes shouting a jubilant chorus for the joy of the rains, but the heart within him was heavy as lead.

"It seems hard lines that the old chap died and made no sign," remarked Bird; "I'm afraid the game is up, and all that you'll get in return for your trouble is that old walking-stick—worth about eight annas!"

"But the papers?" eagerly inquired Crawford.

"I fancy they are not up to much; but I'll go over them when I get back. They looked to me as if they were leases and contracts and receipted bills. I'll run through them in the train if we have a carriage to ourselves."

As it happened they did have an empty carriage to themselves from Shahjehanpore to Lucknow, and during the journey Captain Bird made short work of the contents of the tin box. According to his verdict the papers were nothing but a lot of rotten rubbish, and in a gust of impatience he threw the battered box out of the window of the compartment, and was about to do the same with the parchment, but here Crawford interposed. He reflected that Bird might have overlooked something; anyhow, why throw away a chance? And he made them into a neat roll and tied them together with his handkerchief. Sitting

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vis-à-vis to his companion, he looked as he felt—desperately depressed.

"What will be your next move?" inquired Bird.

"I don't know, I'm sure. I suppose I'll make my way down to Chitari and join Helen, and poke round. Two heads are better than one."

"That's so," agreed the little man; "I shall be getting a move on, too. The 'Hut' is not as gay as it used to be—Mrs. Rann is a bit off colour, and I must be returning to my billet in Calcutta. I suppose we shall see you at dinner to-night."

"Oh, I don't know."

"Buck up! You'll want a bit of cheering society after to-day's journey."

"Well, if I do go over to-night, it will be for the last time. The Ranns have been uncommonly kind, and I have been uncommonly unlucky. I have lost a great deal more money than I can afford."

"But you may pull it all back, old boy! Look at young Randall, the other day, how he swept in the stakes. Play a sporting game, whatever you do, and be a man—or a mouse!"

According to a promise given to Bird, Crawford turned up at the "Hut" for dinner that night, and was received by Mrs. Rann with a sympathy that bordered on the tearful. He was made as much of as if he had inherited a large legacy, instead of having experienced a crushing disappointment. The guests that evening were the invariable "Joey," in a ragged teagown and feverishly high spirits, "Jacko," the good-looking boy from the Hubble Bubble office, Mr. Mund, of the bald head and long purse, a young engineer from Roorki, and two others.

Alas! John Crawford's ill-luck continued. Do what he would, play boldly or cautiously, he lost. At the end of his second rubber of bridge he found that he was a man—but a mouse! and that when he had settled up with Rann he would have exactly ten pounds left, with which to pay his hotel bill and remove himself from the City of Lucknow. Though sorely—nay, desperately—tempted by the gambling spirit within him, he dared not risk this—his *all*, and so, in spite of loud protestations from Joey and Rann, he rose from the table and resigned his place to the young engineer. He and "Jacko" had been partners, and "Jacko's" face of pallid anxiety—a haggard fear in his eyes—the perspiration streaming down his forehead—had more or less put him off his game. The audacity of their opponents was bewildering; how they ran up their bids, and doubled—and redoubled! Of course there was nothing really surprising with respect to this had Crawford and his partner known that Mrs. Rann had inspected their hands and signalled the result to her husband. It struck Crawford that the play was higher than it had ever been, and there was a strange sort of tension in the air. Mrs. Boyd and Mund were seated at a separate table playing *ecarté*, and her screams of laughter and cries of triumph ill accorded with Mund's dead silence and the chalk-white pallor of "Jacko's" face. It was, as Crawford said to himself, "getting a bit too hot." As he stood looking on his attitude was unusually critical; he noted the irrepressible redness of Rann's nose, the sharp, watching glance in Mrs. Rann's fine eyes, and then the Den itself; there was something shoddy, down at heel,

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and, yes, wicked, about its atmosphere. After a short delay he summoned his weak and indolent will, took leave of his hostess, and walked home in the cool starlight, with a head throbbing an accompaniment to the tom-tom in the bazaar!

Arrived at the Majestic Hotel, he found the commercial traveller smoking in the veranda, and as the night was comparatively young, he sat down beside him. He rather wanted to talk to someone; anything was better than going to bed and lying awake, hour after hour, thinking and worrying.

"Been to the theatre?" inquired the commercial.

"No, I've been dining out—and playing cards."

"Not a winner," said the other. "Yes, I could see that with half an eye by the way you walked up the drive."

"You are right," assented Crawford; "I am sorry to say I am a heavy loser—infernal bad luck."

"I say—you haven't, by chance, been playing at the 'Hut,' have you?"

Crawford nodded.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed his companion, struggling to sit erect, "why, that's the very place I was telling you about the other day; kept by a man and his wife, called Rann. Being a stranger—I suppose no one warned you?"

"On the contrary, I was introduced to them by a fellow with whom I came out on board ship."

"Then that must have been Bird—their decoy; a rare little scoundrel. The trio are well known, and come down here and carry on in the quiet season, hauling in to their net all sorts of miserable young fools who have nothing to do in the evenings. And

not only young fellows, but some uncommonly heavy fish. Last year Slocum, who has big estates in Kumaon, was stripped to his last feather; and Jones, of the Survey, was heavily hit, and had to sell his car. You see, the woman, Mrs. Rann, is uncommonly handsome and alluring, and has a most seductive voice. They give first-rate dinners and tip-top liquor—and it *pays!* Then, besides the Ranns, there is a Mrs. Boyd, *divorcée*, with a very shady past. She has means of her own, and is independent of the confederates, but a born gambler; she ropes in lots of boys, who squander their money in the ‘Hut.’”

“By George, you don’t say so!” exclaimed Crawford. “All this is a revelation to me. I have not been in India for twenty-five years, and I thought that manners and customs had changed a good bit, and people were more free and easy—but I was grateful to the Ranns for their hospitality.”

“*Hospitality!*” repeated the other, with a snort. “I expect every time you dined there the meal cost you a hundred rupees. Their web is well set for catching flies. Mrs. Boyd was a lady and Rann a gentleman by birth and upbringing, whatever they are *now*; but as for Mrs. Rann, who, and what she was, and where she came from—don’t ask me!”

“And do you mean to say Captain Bird is their confederate?”

“Rather! He was in the Army, but was broke for debt. He made a livelihood for some time betting and backing ponies. He was turned out of a club for cheating at cards, and now he lives with, and on, the Ranns.”

For once talkative John Crawford was speechless.

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So, little Bird, who had been his familiar friend on board ship, was nothing more nor less than a black sheep and a tout! Under his guidance he had been conducted into a den of thieves, who had stripped him of eighty pounds within ten days. What an idiot he had been! How was he to confess all this to Helen? What would she think when she heard that he had gambled away a sum of money that was practically their all! Then there was this fearful disappointment with regard to his uncle's old servant; he felt as if he were groping in the dark, and did not know what to lay hold of next? Meanwhile the commercial traveller was talking:

"I am afraid these scoundrels have rooked you?"

"If you mean that they have cleared me out—you are right. I shall clear out of this to-morrow."

"Then you have settled your business?"

"No; my business turned out to be an illusion—and a snare—that has very nearly settled *me*."

The commercial turned and stared at his companion, in the lamplight a haggard, handsome, gentlemanly fellow, who seemed to have no lot or part in the country, no profession or employment. He looked very ill, too.

"You seem pretty well fagged out," he said, "and this is a nasty, feverish sort of place in the rains. If you will accept the advice of an old campaigner like myself, you will take five grains of quinine—and go straight to bed!"

"Quinine? I haven't got any!"

"But I have," rejoined his genial companion. "I will go and fetch you a dose now, and as soon as you have swallowed it you must turn in."

The next day Crawford was obliged to stay in bed. Towards evening he got up, and encountered his friend, the commercial traveller, in the sitting-room.

"There has been the devil to pay at the 'Hut,'" he began. "The police are there now."

"Raided for gambling?" said Crawford, and he mentally noted what an escape he had had!

"Gambling? No, not this time; but the result of gambling. That young fellow in the Hubble Bubble Department shot himself there last night."

"What!" exclaimed Crawford. Then he recalled "Jacko's" expression. There had been something terrible in the look on his face when he last saw it. He had left him still playing—when he had made his escape. Poor young "Jacko"! What a handsome fellow! What an end! What would his people say? "Oh, Lord, this is too awful!" Crawford said in a shaky voice. "I left him at the card-table when I cleared out; he had been my partner."

"Well, he will never be anyone's partner again, that's certain. A pal of mine, a police officer, has been telling me all about the affair. He says that when he had lost a matter of five hundred rupees he got up from the table, drank a stiff peg, then asked Mrs. Rann as a favour to come into the drawing-room and sing him one song. The song he chose was 'Bid Me Good-bye.' It seems that he sat listening to this until the last word, then he said, 'Good-bye, Mrs. Rann,' and stood up in the middle of the drawing-room, and in another moment fell dead at her feet: he had shot himself through the brain with a toy revolver. Mrs. Boyd saw all, as she happened

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to be standing in the doorway, and she has been in one fit of hysterics after another ever since."

"Can't say that I'm surprised at that!" muttered Crawford.

"And now it has come out that that poor young fellow, driven on by the pressure of necessity, has been gambling with the money belonging to the department. The books were examined to-day, and there seems to be a large deficit. The poor boy was buried at sundown, and yesterday afternoon I remember seeing him at the band, looking as if he had a good half-century before him, instead of three or four hours."

"What is going to be done with the Ranns? Are they in prison—or what?"

"The two Ranns and Bird are under arrest—at the bungalow. Mrs. Boyd had scooted; she was not really in the gambling business, though no doubt she acted as a sort of decoy. You were in luck to get away in time."

"I was indeed—the only bit of luck that has come my way," replied Crawford, with chattering teeth. The fever was upon him, and he had not only fever to contend with, but the effect of a violent shock, great depression concerning his future, and last and by no means least, a guilty and uneasy conscience. Shaking all over, Crawford withdrew to his room and to bed, where he remained for two or three days, staring at the white-washed wall, counting the lizards, and yearning to be up and away! But an apothecary, who had been called in by the commercial traveller, forbade him to leave his bed or his room. However, he procured ink and paper, and in an

almost unrecognisable hand, dispatched a letter to Helen, the gist of which was :

"I have bad news for you. The hopes I had fixed on Kadir Bux have come to *nothing*. The old man, who was a link between my granduncle and myself, died more than twelve months ago. I am down with fever, and this is not the worst. I have been robbed of nearly all the money which I brought out from home. I have barely sufficient to pay my hotel bill and my expenses down to Chitari. Do you think your kind friend, Mrs. MacNab, would take me in for a few days whilst I consult with you and see about making another start ? "

This letter the good Samaritan stamped and posted with his own hand.

A reply arrived within two days in the shape of a wire, which said :

"Delighted to see you. Start as soon as you can.—MACNAB."

CHAPTER XIII

CHITARI

MRS. MACNAB, known to her intimates as "Anne," was fifty-three years of age, the widow of a Scotch contractor who had arrived in India as private in a Highland regiment, and—like not a few of his sagacious countrymen—had prospered exceedingly. When he died he left his wife with two little girls—the younger in arms, the other ten—and a substantial sum of well-invested savings. Mrs. MacNab, who was endowed with great energy and decision of character, promptly made up her mind to settle in the hills, where her children would find a good climate and some sort of "Europe" education. With this intention she established a modest boarding-house, or second-rate hotel, and, being an active and capable creature—as well as an admirable cook and manager—she made an immediate success. She could not endure the thought of sitting down at her age with idle hands and living on poor Sandy's hard-earned savings. On the contrary, she was resolved to increase them! The little hill hotel prospered; its situation was retired, its beginnings were humble; but, somehow or other, it suited the pockets of the wives of poor subalterns seeking a refuge from the scorching plains. Certainly it was remote from club and shops, but the house was scrupulously clean and comfortable. Everything was

orderly and well regulated; there were no odd cups and saucers, torn tablecloths, or a scarcity of towels. The cooking was appetising and varied—several Indian dishes included in the menu were of a distinctly novel flavour, pungent but toothsome; servants were admirably trained, and the hostess herself the soul of motherliness and good temper. Mrs. MacNab, the moving spirit in the establishment, ordered and managed both household and guests. She found the latter jampannis, told them where to pay calls, where to shop, what to buy and what *not* to buy, and helped them out of any little difficulties. Her command of native languages was astonishing—she was to be seen, and her voice was to be heard, about the compound in the early morning, exhorting cowmen, woodcutters and coolies.

Her cook, an elderly Mahomedan with a dyed red beard, was her right hand and—one might almost say—her confidant! The comfort of “MacNab’s” was soon noised abroad, and after a time, so wide was the circle of its customers, the hotel was compelled to move to a larger house and more pretentious establishment. Nevertheless, the prudent proprietress did not lose her head, but still maintained a cautious course, was known to have saved largely, and had received (in consequence) not a few offers of marriage, all of which she politely declined. To tell the truth, the red-haired widow liked to rule—and to rule alone! Such was the fame of “MacNab’s” that the rooms were booked from one season to the next, and would-be guests, and even mutual friends, quarrelled acrimoniously over her quarters. Although never advertised, great indeed was “MacNab’s”

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reputation! Meanwhile, her family grew up; the girls, although members of the Church of England, were educated at the local convent, where they were taught manners, needlework, and one or two sketchy accomplishments. At seventeen Jessie, the elder child, who was almost startlingly pretty, married into the "railway." But within eighteen months both she and her husband were dead (of cholera), leaving an infant orphan to the care of Grannie MacNab. As Grannie's youngest daughter was but eight, she and her niece were brought up together as bed-fellows and play-fellows. The aunt, Lily MacNab, resembled her pretty dead sister; she had small, clear features, a wealth of hair, and a pair of magnificent eyes. At eighteen she too had a lover, but death seemed to stalk Mrs. MacNab's daughters, for the lover died, and Lily never replaced him. She was twenty-eight years of age, graceful, attractive, and still unmarried. Whether this was true constancy, who shall say? It might have been that the gay young men who came to "MacNab's" flirted with Lily and then rode away—possibly found the dark beauty a little too dark; and the other class, tradespeople and sergeants, were possibly not worthy of her serious consideration; consequently she hung—so to speak—between earth and sky, and was still Miss MacNab, though her long Oriental eyes were full of a sleepy fire and her slim, supple figure the perfection of provocative grace.

When Lorna, at the age of eighteen, caught the fancy of a gentleman whose grandfather had been a general, her good-natured Aunt Lily exhibited no jealousy; she was entirely devoted to her niece, and

immensely proud of what was referred to as "the grand match." This same grand match undoubtedly put the finishing stroke to Mrs. MacNab's ambition; she had saved a considerable sum, she was fifty-four years of age, and desired to enjoy the remainder of her days in her own country. To the regret and unconcealed annoyance of her patrons, she sold "MacNab's," with its good-will, furniture, fowls and cows (all save one beloved animal), and removed herself, her daughter, and a certain amount of household goods (also the cow) to her own province—and Chitari. Here she had been born, and here for many years she had spent her annual holiday. Her father had been a Yorkshireman, a notable forest ranger, her mother a lovely Eurasian, who belonged to the neighbourhood—and was said to have the blood of a Rajah in her veins. Bustling and capable Anne MacNab soon settled down in Chitari. She purchased five hundred acres of land and a substantial old house, once the dwelling of a wealthy Malguzar. The woodwork was of teak and heavily carved; the rooms were spacious; there was a large, untidy garden, full of orange trees, mangoes, guavas, and a long range of solid outhouses. After some necessary alterations had been effected, Mrs. MacNab and her daughter left the dāk bungalow and entered into possession. Furniture was bought, also cows, poultry, a milch buffalo, and—oh, pride!—a pair of fine plough bullocks. Mrs. MacNab was in her element, and already superintended the tilling of her very own property; but Lily was not so entirely contented as her parent. She missed the shops, the band, the lively people who came and went, developed no taste

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for cows, crops, or even poultry. She had no congenial companions—merely one or two local families who were rather stupid and uninteresting. She missed her circle in the north, of shop-assistants, sergeants, conductors, and clerks—all fervent admirers of lovely Miss Lily. The club, thanks to the rains, was almost empty; there was no tennis. In short, Lily was in a querulous and dissatisfied frame of mind when her mother received a wire from Bombay announcing Lorna's imminent arrival "with a friend."

Helen felt uncommonly tired and stiff as she descended from the back seat of the tonga and saw Mrs. MacNab and Lily on the veranda awaiting Lorna with open arms. Naturally, their first attention and welcome was for the poor young widow, whom they received with embraces, exclamations, and tears; and whilst they kissed and murmured to their beloved relative, Helen stood a little aloof and attempted to realise the family. Mrs. MacNab was a stout, trim, squarely built matron with a genial expression and a pair of shrewd brown eyes; her hair was red, thick, and wavy, the original warmth of colour being now somewhat tempered by a sprinkling of white. She wore a neat black-and-white cotton gown, a large apron, and a pair of shoes, which had undoubtedly their origin in the bazaar. Her feet and hands were, for her bulk, surprisingly small, and she looked what she was—a capable, kindly, honest woman. Lily did not resemble her mother in the least; no one would have guessed at the relationship between them. Anne MacNab had inherited the character and appearance of her father's

people, hard-headed, industrious Yorkshire Tykes. On Lily had been bestowed the Eastern beauty and languid grace of her grandmother; she was tall and slim, with masses of silky hair, liquid dark eyes, a caressing smile, and gesticulated with tiny, boneless hands all the time she talked. Her gown was a fashionable white cambric, touched with a black ribbon (for Lily was a notable milliner, and since her return to Chitari had trimmed almost every hat in the place). When she and her mother had exhausted their expressions of joy and grief, they turned to welcome Helen. Mrs. MacNab planted a brisk, dry kiss on either cheek, saying in her "chi chi" accent:

"I am glad to see you, my dear. My! but you do look done! Better go and rest after supper."

Lily, for her part, murmured some kindly sentences, offered a small, limp hand and an enchanting smile, and thus the meeting Helen had anticipated with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension was over.

The old bungalow itself was cool and dim. Helen's bedroom, which opened directly out of that of her friend, was plainly furnished, Indian fashion—one small white veiled bedstead, surrounded by a sea of matting. After supper the new-comer was thankful to say "Good-night" and retire; but Lorna sat up for hours, relating with sobs and impassioned gestures her griefs and grievances to two deeply sympathetic listeners.

"It is very, very sad about poor Charlie," said her grandmother, "and strange that such a nice fellow should have such horrid people; but it will be arl

right for you now, dear child; you are home, and never again will I spare you to England! By and by you will pick up like a flower that has been beaten to the ground by heavy rain."

But in answer to this hopeful prognostication her grand-daughter shook her head so vigorously that her hair came down.

"Now that Lorna is the widow of a gentleman," said her aunt, "the Hydes will come and call; but, of course, they won't invite *us*."

"Yes, my dear," assented her mother. "Old Mrs. Grover, Mr. Hyde's aunt, knew my mother when she lived here as wife to the Deputy Commissioner. My mother—oh, she was a beauty! As a child, I remember her big dark eyes, and her long, long hair, and how she would laugh and cry—oh, my! it would frighten you."

After a time Mrs. MacNab inquired about Helen and her affairs. When these had been exhaustively explained Lily threw up her hands and said:

"Whatt! Come out to look for a treasure? Well, I never! What a funny man! Do you think he is a fool?"

"No, indeed. I should say he was sharp enough; has lots to say for himself, and is uncommonly good-looking. Years and years ago he was in the army, and lost all his money. He is quite poor now—and not very young; but when he talks of his prospects he is just like a boy—so excited, and full of hope, and so happy!"

"Hope?" echoed her grandmother. "Then he really must be a fool. Only a fool would expect to find a fortune that has been lost sight of for forty

years. There was land, too—it is said about thirty villages—but they have fallen to the Crown. As for the Begum, her people were some sort of cousins of the Bhandara family. She was oldish when she went crazy about a handsome Englishman. Towards the end of his life he came down to the C.P. and lived in retirement, native fashion, just like a rich Thakur. I have heard it was his custom to go round to villages on an elephant, collecting the rents himself ! Then this came to an end, and he was gradually forgotten."

After her cramped, monotonous existence, in such new surroundings Helen felt a different creature. Everything to her was a delightful novelty, from the natives, whom she watched streaming past the bungalow, to the food which was served on Mrs. MacNab's liberal table—"Dâl bat," curried vegetables, and mango-fool. For the first day or two she was content to wander round the farm, and the great untidy garden, which was full of orange and lemon trees, mangoes, and strange-looking native vegetables. She wished to leave Lorna alone with her own relations, and implored them not to treat her as a stranger, assuring them she was so happy in this beautiful climate, where everything was a novelty. The MacNab family took her at her word, and made no attempt at company manners, but allowed the English girl to ramble about unattended and undisturbed. She was deeply interested in watching the curry stuff being ground between two stones, in witnessing the primitive working of the old well—which was exactly like the picture in an illustrated Bible, representing the meeting between Jacob and Rachel;

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and then the farmyard exhibited strange animals, such as the blue-eyed, frightful milch buffalo, the long-legged game fowl, the fine cream-coloured bullocks. She delighted in making acquaintance with new flowers, new birds, and new fruit. Meanwhile, her friend Lorna remained indoors most of the time, nursing her grief, which seemed to have been increased by the sympathy of her family, and it was Lily who introduced her to the surroundings of the bungalow, and escorted her into the so-called town. In its midst was a great tank, lined with rows of shallow steps; at one end stood a cluster of Jain temples. As it happened to be market day, the space round the tank was crowded with bullocks (large and small), carts, pack ponies, and sellers and buyers—bargaining for grain and cloth, brass and earthen pots, native spices—"gur" and "ghi." The bright colours set off the mass—men in green or yellow turbans, women in saris of red or white or pink. Chitari was renowned for its saris. Everywhere Helen looked there was vivid life, and her ears were almost deafened with the babel of tongues. Market day was a sort of weekly festival; the atmosphere held an impression of huka smoke, the breath of cattle, coriander seeds, and oil.

Beyond the centre of the town was a labyrinth of narrow lanes, lined with two-storied houses, the lower part of which were dark, cavernous little shops, with carved fronts, open to the world. Here were sold grain, glass bangles, country cloth, sweetmeats; but above and beyond all, the brilliant silk saris, for which Chitari was famous.

Lily, who appeared to know the whole of the

bazaar and its inhabitants, introduced Helen to the principal stall for these celebrated wares, which were woven in the town. The selection consisted of all shades of red, rose, white, cream, dark blue, or green—fifteen to twenty yards in length—and the ends finished with heavy bands of gold. Lily displayed them, and her thin, supple fingers handled the silken draperies with a dexterity and admiration, the outcome of her native blood, and looked as if a sari were her appropriate costume!

Beyond the bazaar were the hospital and court-house; further off, at a dignified distance, stood the Commissioner's pleasant two-storied residence, at present veiled in the Allamanda, a beautiful orange creeper, and surrounded by well-kept grounds and tennis courts.

"There are few people here now," explained Lily. "Not that we have many at any time. Mr. Bennett, the Deputy Commissioner, is in the hills; he is a widower and does not entertain much, and is rather dull and stand-off; somehow or other we can never get to know him well—there are men like that! He never comes in and out in a nice friendly way, nor does he invite people to see his wonderful gardens—his craze: he is *mad* about flowers. Now the man who was here before him left the gardens and tennis courts open to the public—I mean to people like ourselves. He was nearly always away shooting. Then we have the forest officer, Mr. Hyde; he is married and has a large family, and is very poor. We don't visit them—or rather they won't visit us."

"I thought everyone was in the same set out here?" said Helen.

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"No, indeed," responded Lily with energy. "Not even in a tiny station like this. You see, we are not gentlefolk. Father was a private before he made his money as a contractor. Grannie's people lived round here; her mother was an Eurasian, extraordinarily handsome. Some say we are kin to the Bhundara family at Korba; anyway, they always deal with us for butter and eggs, and mangoes, and what is more, they *pay*!"

"Have you ever seen them?" inquired Helen.

"No; mother has been to the palace once or twice, but I—no, I don't want to see a lot of women. Well, now that you have inspected Chitari, tell me what you think of it?"

"I think you are extremely *lucky* to live here!"

"What? You don't mean that! Why, it is awfully dull! There are no dances, no young men, no picnics or parties—not even a doctor or parson. A padre bicycles over here now and then and gives us a short service on a week day. He is a great shikari, and spends most of his time shooting. Of course, in cool weather, when the club is going, things are a little better; but we have scarcely any society, except Manfred, the apothecary, and his wife, the Pereiras, the telegraph people, and young engineers or railway boys who come to the dâk bungalow. There are the Stocks, missionaries; they are no good—so pious and dismal. You see, I have always been accustomed to more life; I love dancing, and talking, and pretty new clothes, and pretty compliments. Now, as for mother, she is happy. Every bit of her heart is planted in the land, and in a big topee and a pair of strong shoes, and a stick in her hand, she

tramps about like a Malguzar, overlooking her beloved crops and talking to the ploughmen and Korkus, and has forgotten all her smart, business-like hotel ways. Oh, she was a wonderful woman to run a hotel, I can tell you. People used to wire, and write, and come and beg for rooms. Next hot-weather I shall make her take us up to the hills and let her see how other hotels are run ! ”

“ I wonder where *we* shall be next hot-weather ? ” said Helen.

“ That I can tell you : living on your great fortune, in some beautiful place in England. ”

“ No, indeed. I have a presentiment we shall never find it ; we have come out forty years too late ! ”

“ But you have heard the saying, ‘ Better late than never ! ’ I do hope you will have some luck. Now I wish luck would look my way. Oh, it is dull here,” throwing up her tiny hands, “ dull, dull, dull ! Though I dare not grumble to mother. She would say, in her sensible way, that I have plenty to eat, a nice large home, money to spend, and good health. But oh, how I *wish* someone would come, or something would happen—a runaway match, a scandal, or even a fire ! ”

Not to be outdone by her daughter, Mrs. Mac-Nab conducted the guest on a tour of inspection round her fairly extensive property, which at the moment was being tilled by plough bullocks and Korku labourers. As they walked along between the divisions she pointed out the queer bakar or native plough, with its iron share, and said :

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"How they would laugh at that in England! However, it answers arl right. Here," halting for a moment, "we sow wheat; over there," pointing with her stick, "I put gram. The soil is first-rate, and will bring in eight-fold of the seed. I expect a great crop, for the ground is as good as the Tapti valley—please God there is no rust—and I may stand breast high in wheat!" And her eyes shone at the prospect.

"And when will you begin to sow?"

"The end of next month, as the rains permit, and, of course, on an auspicious day."

"You mean a fine day?" inquired Helen.

"No, my dear; I mean a *lucky* day! An old woman in the bazaar will read me the favourable signs. One thing is certain, and this I tell you: never plant on Saturday or Tuesday, and get all your sowing done within thirteen days. Ah! I see you are staring at me with your pretty blue eyes. Yes; I admit that I am superstitious."

"Oh, then you believe in signs and tokens and spells and charms?"

"Most truly I do."

"Then perhaps your old woman could tell my father something about his fortune."

"It is a good thought. I will send for her before long." Then, as she stood surveying her estate, she drew in a long breath and said, "How I wish Lorna would come out and see this beautiful land; but she lies on her bed, crying half the time, and would remain there altogether but for *you*, you kind girl. With Lorna it is ever great joy or great grief."

"It is strange, but she is worse than on board

ship, for there she had some gleams of cheerfulness. I have seen her almost gay."

"And here it is all grief, and always calling on her 'poor boy.'"

"Yes; and I am so sorry about the baby. If it had lived it would have been such a comfort."

"No; it were best dead!" was Mrs. MacNab's astounding pronouncement.

"Oh, Mrs. MacNab, how can you say that?"

"Then—she did not tell you?"

"No; she scarcely spoke of it."

"I believe the poor little thing was very dark. My! such a pitee. And an awful shock to those Taylors. They made a terrible to-do, and refused to go to the funeral."

"Oh, how shameful of them!" exclaimed Helen, and she recalled Lorna's reserved manner and her fixed expression when she had sympathised with her loss. Undoubtedly the dark baby was an unwelcome topic.

After a considerable silence she glanced at Mrs. MacNab, who with folded hands complacently surveyed her wide acres.

"Do you prefer living here to the hills?"

"Oh yes, my dear. Why, this is my own country. Up in the Himalayas I missed these great plains of wheat, the grand forests, the long flat roads, and the sound of creaking carts—yes, and the smell of the wood-smoke. Rocks and pine trees—noa, not for *me*!" And with this remark she turned homewards, but when they had gone a few steps she paused and exclaimed: "Ah, here comes Lily—with a letter—it will be for you!"

CHAPTER XIV

A REFUGEE

WHEN Helen received her father's letter, and imparted its contents to Lily—who subsequently repeated it to Mrs. MacNab—that worthy and hospitable woman dispatched a wire, which brought a tired and haggard traveller to a haven of refuge under her roof.

Crawford looked bowed and shrunken as he stumbled up the steps of the veranda and was presented to Mrs. and Miss MacNab, who accorded him a warm welcome and installed him in comfortable quarters. At first his sensation was that of profound relief; he would not suffer his thoughts to go backwards or forwards; no, he simply subsided into the enjoyment of a present atmosphere of comfort and indulgence. Helen's handsome and distinguished parent made, for all his hollow cheeks, an immediate impression on Lily; he was a gentleman every inch! She was immensely sympathetic, and he found her as effusive and attentive to him and his wants precisely as if he had been a valued and long lost friend.

"My dear, I've never seen Lily so taken up with anyone!" remarked Mrs. MacNab. "I can only suppose that your father is a little like her lover, the opium officer, who died of fever."

"Father certainly does look ill, and he delights in being petted, and made much of. I'm afraid that

the disappointment about the old servant and the loss of his money have upset him very much. However, he has wonderful spirits and he will soon recover—he always does.”

“How wonderful !” exclaimed Mrs. MacNab. “I wish poor Lorna were like that !”

For two or three days Helen saw little of her father except at meals. His room was in a *dufta* or office at some distance from the house; but he generally sat in the garden under a shady tree with Lily, or smoked in the veranda, and continued to play the invalid, discussed his temperature, and spoke in a low, exhausted voice. There was no doubt that Crawford purposely avoided his daughter and the hour of his confession, and supreme humiliation. At last the hour struck, when she discovered him alone and defenceless, reclining in a comfortable cane chair, under the tamarind tree.

“I have not liked to worry you before, Father,” she began, “as I know that you have been knocked up with fever and your journey, but I should like to hear full particulars of your visit to the Aboo Sait.”

“Oh, my dear, that’s easily told,” and in a few glib sentences he rattled off an account of the expedition, winding up with: “And all that I got for my trouble and the expense of coming out to India is this old walking stick !” exhibiting it as he spoke.

“It’s not much !” she exclaimed. “Have you any further plans? What are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know from Adam !” he rejoined, as he lent back languidly and crossed his knees. “All I have in the world at present is three rupees.”

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"And the hundred pounds you took to Lucknow, Daddy?"

"Oh, well, of course," he hesitated, "there was my bill for a fortnight, and my journey here——" and he paused.

"Yes," she assented briskly, "your hotel bill——"

"I suppose I must make a clean breast of it," now sitting erect; as his daughter nodded emphatically, he added: "To make a long story short, I lost it at cards."

"At cards!" she repeated, and her face quivered.

"Yes; Bird, the damned little scoundrel, took me into a den of thieves, and once I began to play, and to lose, I could not stop! I never can; I'm made that way. Your mother knew that cards were my curse. Helen, my dear girl, I'm most frightfully sorry; I feel awfully cut up!" His manner was almost abject as he added: "I'd give myself a jolly good licking—if I could."

For some time Helen sat bewildered and speechless; she had always realised her father's unfitness for affairs, but such reckless irresponsibility surpassed her worst fears. She felt, sitting there with her hands locked in her lap, her eyes searching the great plain, as if she and her parent had been suddenly swept into a new and uncharted sea. "What are we to do?" she asked at last.

"Have you no money?" he inquired.

"Only a few rupees. Don't you remember you gave me only just enough to pay my fare?"

Another expressive silence, during which parent and child eyed one another anxiously. At last he spoke, and his tone was calmness itself: "What

about your hundred a year? That would keep us afloat for some time."

"Yes, one payment is due next month; but, by all accounts, in these days a hundred a year won't go far in India. Mrs. MacNab told me that she remembers the time when a married subaltern could keep a couple of horses and live well—food was so cheap—and gram seventy seers for the rupee. Now it is very different. One thing is quite certain—we must not sponge on these kind, hospitable people."

"No," and he stirred uneasily. "Though they have lots of money, their own cows and poultry, so we can't cost them *much*."

"But, Daddy, we have no right to cost them a penny; they are strangers, and we haven't the smallest claim upon them."

"Miss MacNab—by Jove, what a handsome girl!—told me only this morning, she hoped that we would stay for *months*!"

"Oh, that's an exploded Indian idea; a hundred years ago people paid visits of almost half a lifetime; but in these days the week-end custom has been introduced. The MacNabs, apparently, hold to the old Indian fashion; but I, for one, will not abuse their hospitality—and you know they sell the produce of the farm. Mrs. MacNab is a first-rate business woman: the fowls, the eggs, the melons, and the mangoes, all go down to the railway station—and I think we should accompany them in a day or two!"

"Then in that case I shall have to borrow our railway fare from Mrs. MacNab; but I think they

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would be rather hurt if we turned out so hastily. This is a leisurely country, and we must have a few days to pull ourselves together and look round."

"We should never have come to India," said the girl with emphasis.

"No, but since we are here we will have to make the best of it."

"I'll advertise in the paper, and try for some situation."

"You may spare yourself the trouble; no one wants a reader in this country."

"That is true; but a governess—a nurserymaid; I'd be anything—anything—sooner than a hanger-on!"

"I'll look out for a job, too, but I've had a severe shake—that fever floored me; by the by, later I might get a job as inspector or accountant; I'll try anyhow."

"What are you going to try?" inquired Lily, coming forward gracefully, tray in hand.

"To make money, Miss MacNab," he replied; "I'm stone broke; you know my great scheme has collapsed."

"Oh, nonsense. You cannot go and earn!" she protested. "You are not fit. Mother would never allow it; and here, I've just brought you an egg beaten up in milk, with a little drop of brandy—so nice! We must feed you up. I——" and she heaved a heavy sigh, "know what fever means."

"So do I, by Jove!" he exclaimed, extending his hand for the tumbler. "My dear Miss MacNab, you *spoil* me!"

"No, no," she protested! "we are only too glad to have you—and——"—an after thought—"Helen. It makes such a nice change for us; we have always been accustomed to guests."

"Paying guests!" corrected Helen.

"Oh, you silly girl. What do you know about paying guests? I believe you are restless, like the rest of the world, but I shall not allow you to take your father away"—laying a possessive hand on his sleeve. And John Crawford, who was easily led on by a touch of flattery, gave her a grateful and confidential smile. "By the way, Helen," she continued, "mother wants to show you the little new white calf. You said you would like to see it; she is over in the cowshed waiting for you."

Under these circumstances Helen had no alternative but to remove herself, and she rose and left her father and his admirer to a *tête-à-tête*.

As she stood in the byre and inspected the new white calf, on the impulse of the moment Helen appealed to Mrs. MacNab, and told her she wished to try for a situation as governess or nurserymaid. "I can play the piano and sing; I speak French; read aloud; do accounts; and sew. Do you think, dear Mrs. MacNab, you could put me in the way of employment?"

"By and by," she answered, after a reflective pause, "if you like; but not now. No, not for a long time. You see, you are company for poor broken-hearted Lorna, and your father is company for Lily, who feels so dull here—after being accustomed to a gay hill station, and lots of gentlemen boarders. She does like talking to Mr. Crawford

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and looking after him; it reminds her of old days. It keeps her busy and amused. I think he may resemble the poor, dear fellow who died; anyway, Helen, as to your going and looking for a situation—what I have to say to you is this: ‘No and no—and *noa!*’ ”

CHAPTER XV

TOO CHEAP

AFTER a day or two of complete rest John Crawford recovered his spirits and his appetite—the interview with his daughter had undoubtedly cleared the air; his self-possession and self-confidence returned, and he took to the easy, comfortable life, and to Lily's ministrations, as the proverbial duck to water. He accompanied her to the market and bazaar; carried her parcels and was introduced to her friends, Mrs. Pereira of the telegraph, Mrs. Manfredo, the apothecary's wife—both of whom were visibly impressed by the stranger's good looks and distinguished air. He proved uncommonly handy in the house and garden—mending locks, picking fruit, helping to doctor a sick turkey, and in short he began to feel thoroughly at home and seemed to have entirely lost sight of his original purpose in coming to India.

Meanwhile Helen, who had received her quarter's cheque, interviewed Mrs. MacNab in her little office. As soon as the girl began to talk of money and payment, she assumed her discarded businesslike attitude and, sitting at the bare wooden table encompassed with milk bills and grain accounts, listened to the girl's offer with a face that wore an expression of Mrs. MacNab of the hotel; by degrees this expression relaxed, and, after meditating for a long while, she said :

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"Well, you are poor Lorna's friend, and yet too proud to be our guests; you were her help and support on the passage coming out—only for you she would have died! She told me so over and over again. How you sat up with her at nights, how you brought her food—tea, and soups, and puddings; how you read to her, and coaxed her to go on deck—oh, we are greatly in *your* debt—and now you want to pay! Noa—noa!"

After a long pause Helen said: "My father and I are very happy here, and you are more than kind; but, if we stay, we must pay. What I did for Lorna was nothing—it does not count."

"Oh, all right then," said Mrs. MacNab with an impatient jerk of her head. "Then I will take you and your father for fifteen rupees a week—the two—and you shall pay for your dhobie. Tell me, how is that?"

"It is much too cheap—it is not enough," was the prompt rejoinder.

"My! that is the first time anyone ever said to me, 'Mrs. MacNab, this is too cheap!' It is enough—bazaar here is moderate. I know how to get good value in wheat and gur and ghi. I don't want to *make* on Lorna's friends. So," extending a broad and capable hand, "is it a bargain? If that is so, you can bring me your rupees here every Monday morning—hotel business fashion."

To this arrangement Helen assented with a light and happy heart. How fortunate they were to have dropped by chance into such a delightful home, that seemed so far aloof from the storms and battles of the world.

She lost no time in informing her father of this arrangement; he received the news with considerable complacency, and said :

"Clever girl—it is a first-class bandobast ! Well now, my dear, you can spare me a little pocket-money for smokes, and so on. I'll send down to Bombay and get some cigarettes for Lily. I really must do something, she has been so kind and attentive. If you can let me have ten rupees now I'll send off the order at once ; a man does not like to be under a compliment to a woman."

And now there came two days of heavy rain, a reminder that the monsoon was still in action. The weather compelled the household to live in the veranda, where they sat most of the day. The rain pattered noisily on the great banana leaves, ran out of the spouts in torrents of waterfalls, and cut up the drive as with a plough. Between the meal-times Helen read aloud, whilst Lily sewed, Crawford smoked, and Mrs. MacNab nursed in her ample lap a couple of invalid chickens. Towards the end of the second wet afternoon, to the great joy of the whole party, a bullock tonga splashed under the porch, and a little dark woman with bright grey eyes alighted and ran up the steps of the veranda. This was Mrs. Pereira, the news-monger of Chitari.

"I have come to see if you are alive," she began breathlessly.

"Allow me," said Crawford politely, taking her umbrella and bringing forward a chair.

"Oh, don't you bother, Mister—don't you bother," she protested. "The Hydés are back"—turning to Mrs. MacNab—"and Mrs. Hyde is

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expecting a cousin; and Mr. Bennett comes to-morrow."

"Then things will begin to wake up!" said Lily. "Is the Hydes' cousin a man—or a woman?"

"A man, I understand."

"I hope he plays tennis. What do you think of my blouse?" holding up the delicate article in pink silk.

"Oh, my! Killing! What do you say, Mister?" glancing at Crawford.

Before he could invent a suitable reply Mrs. MacNab said: "Tell me, Mimi, do you know if that Jadoo woman is back in the bazaar?"

"Yes, I saw her two days ago."

"Oh, then, do let us have her up!" urged Lily. "Your bullock man could go and call her. Tell him we will give her a good fee—and opium pills!"

"Opium pills!" repeated Helen. "You dare not!"

"Oh my, yes—they all take it here, and majum and ganga."

This statement was indignantly negated and argued by Mrs. MacNab, and she and Lily wrangled until the bullock tonga, with its trotting bullocks, came squelching up to the porch, and from the back seat descended a little wrinkled woman wearing a red sari. The only remarkable thing about her were her eyes, these were hard and very piercing. She politely removed her shoes as she entered, and salaamed with deliberate ceremony.

"We have sent for you, Buddie," said Lily, "to tell this young lady's fortune—yes, and the Sahib's too!"

The fortune-teller advanced and took Helen's somewhat reluctant hand between her damp, claw-like fingers, turned it over, shook her head, examined it again and, after an expressive silence, spoke. Her verdict, as translated by Mrs. MacNab, was: "You have had some trouble—and you will have more; but later the gods will smile! You will marry a tall man, perhaps next year. You will live in this country for a long time. One day, when your hair is white, you will be rich—and that is all."

"I don't think much of that fortune!" said Lily. "What is the good of riches—when the hair is white? Now, Mr. Crawford, let us hear what she says about you"; and, as she led the little old woman to where he was seated, he languidly extended a hand.

"Ah, yes," she said. (On this occasion Lily acted as interpreter.) "You have been fortunate."

"That's a bad shot, anyhow," he interpolated.

"Much has been given you," she resumed, "but *you* give little—and yet you are no miser. No, your hands are ever open——"

"And empty!" he supplemented. "Ask her if she sees anything curious in the lines of my palm—any indication of a store of jewels, or gold, and a big fortune?"

"No, no," answered Lily with a waving gesture, after she had questioned the old woman. "But Buddie says she sees prosperity, and that you have luck—others have gone to the wall to suffer *you* to pass. So far, this has not availed you much. You have no care of money; as soon as it comes to you it is gone like a puff of wind."

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"That's no good! I could have told you all that myself!"

"I will give her a couple of opium pills," continued Lily, "and then she will talk more, you will see!" and she withdrew to fetch the dose.

As soon as the fortune-teller had received and absorbed this stimulant, she said:

"Behold, the Sahib is not content!—and therefore I will tell him further happenings. He is a seeker—not now, but he will seek again—for what he will never find. Nevertheless, he will be rich and prosperous. As for the great wealth for which he craves, it will be discovered by *two*, who will find it at the peril of their lives."

"Well, at least, I am to be rich and prosperous," said Crawford. "That will be a pleasant change, eh, Helen?"

"Now, Buddie, tell me something," said Lily, sidling up to her as she spoke. "Something very, very nice."

Whatever Buddie imparted was unknown to the Crawfords, but they noticed that Lily looked radiant and excited as she clapped her hands and danced about the veranda.

Then Mrs. MacNab had her turn, the result of which she, unlike her daughter, subsequently translated.

"Yes, it will be all right about my crops," she said. "The wheat will be heavy—the gram above the average, the cotton middling. At first Buddie told me I should lose something, and I said no, *not* the English cow?—not a relation?—and, after all, what do you think!—it was only a tooth!"

The *séance* was now at an end; the old woman was apparently not disposed to divulge any further information; the veil of the future was dropped. Having received her fee and resumed her shoes, Buddie salaamed to the company and was presently carried away in the bullock tonga.

The storm had passed off, the clouds lifted, and Chitari was no longer enveloped in a cloak of white mist. One morning, after the visit of the Jadoo-wallah, whilst Crawford and Lily were sauntering towards the club, she exclaimed in an awestruck voice: "Oh, here comes the Deputy Commissioner!"

Mr. Bennett was also on foot and, as he approached, Crawford saw that he was a stout, elderly man, with a clean-shaven pink face, wide nostrils, and white eyelashes—almost an albino. When they met Lily said, with her most ingratiating smile:

"We are most awfuller glad to see you back again! Oh, we *have* missed you." Then, as he glanced interrogatively at her companion, she added: "This is our friend, Mr. Crawford, who came out on board ship with Lorna."

The men exchanged greetings and, after a pause, Crawford said:

"I say, are you, by any chance, an old Cheltonian? I remember a fellow of your name."

"Yes, that was me!" admitted Bennett. "And I think you must be the Crawford who was in the fifth form?"

"That's right. I've been in the Army and in lots of holes and corners and troubles ever since."

Bennett stared at him incredulously. In spite of

this announcement, "Beauty Crawford," as he was called, looked debonair, self-satisfied and well-groomed. "What wind has blown you out here?" inquired the Deputy Commissioner.

"As a matter of fact, the monsoon carried us into Bombay—my daughter and me, along with Mrs. Taylor—and we are now staying with her people *pro tem*."

"Indeed," exclaimed Bennett, with a rather blank expression. "Well, you must come over and dine, and have a good old jaw about our school days. I dine at eight; can you come to-night?"

After this interview Lily returned home figuratively treading on air. Since Mr. Crawford and the Deputy Commissioner were old friends and school-fellows, of course matters would now be on a different footing, and *they* would be in the Residency set!

As Mr. Bennett turned towards his comfortable home and excellent breakfast, he said to himself: "Now, what can that fellow be doing here of all places? There is no civil or military job to fit him. I remember his face well—uncommonly good-looking, a great talker, a bit of a slacker, but popular enough."

Mr. Bennett had always avoided the MacNab abode, for handsome Lily had made it abundantly evident that she would like to be the Deputy Commissioner's lady! She borrowed his magazines, sent him many little chits, and always contrived to play tennis in his set—losing no opportunity of making sweet eyes and sweet speeches. He admitted to himself that there was no question of her good looks—Lily MacNab was as handsome and as graceful as

any Spanish beauty—and, being unusually fair himself, he was naturally attracted towards the opposite complexion. Nevertheless, he made a firm stand—no mixed blood for him ! And yet the prudent fellow realised that if he saw Lily too often he might succumb to her seductions, and therefore he kept away. He even went to the hills, in order to put a certain space between himself, and an almost irresistible temptation !

CHAPTER XVI

THE RESIDENCY

CRAWFORD dined with his old schoolfellow, and enjoyed an excellent dinner—which included a succulent young peacock—and a more or less one-sided conversation. He was the talker, his host the listener. Needless to say, he painted his past to his own satisfaction, and skipped lightly over his numerous failures, touched on the death of his wife, the usefulness of his daughter, and his project which had ended in disappointment. Bennett, who was a shrewd man, read without difficulty the lines of Crawford's history of the last thirty years. It was the same old story—a good-looking, agreeable slacker, always leaning on others for support, and generally proving successful. And what a wild-goose chase to come out to India to search for the fortune of a man who had been dead for nearly half a century—yes, and dragging an unfortunate daughter at his heels! He wondered what the girl was like, and what she would make of an idle life in Chitari.

When Bennett took leave of his guest that night he invited him to come again the next day and bring Miss Crawford to tea and to see the garden.

"I know," he added, "that I ought to go over and pay her a formal visit of ceremony, but the MacNab bungalow frightens me—it is so full of women!"

"Not so many now," replied Crawford. "The poor little widow seems to have developed a sort of melancholia; she cannot get her loss out of her head, and she never appears, so there is only the old lady, Helen, and Miss Lily."

"And *she*," said Bennett, "is a host in herself."

"She is," agreed Crawford, "and uncommonly handsome. I wonder she is not married."

Bennett made no reply, he had his own opinion on the subject, but merely said: "Your daughter must find the ménage at Mrs. MacNab's rather strange after England—too much 'chi chi' and curry and ghi, eh?"

"Not at all, they do us uncommonly well. Helen likes the MacNabs, and is delighted with what she has seen of India—which, however, is not much."

"How does she put in her time?"

"Oh, she sits with Lorna and does her best to cheer her up; then she gardens, after a fashion, and pokes round the farm with Mrs. MacNab, and reads aloud to us of an evening."

"Not a very gay programme, eh?" he remarked derisively.

"Oh, Helen does not mind; she has never had what you would call 'a gay time'; there has been no money for dress and amusements, and that sort of thing."

"And so ignorance is bliss!" exclaimed Bennett.

"And *great* bliss, too," replied Crawford with emphasis.

"An easily pleased young lady. Well, I shall expect you both to tea to-morrow at four o'clock. I get back from the Court about then. Now Sawmi

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will bring his lantern and light you home. In the rains there are swarms of snakes crawling about the roads—a kareit might get you! Good night!"

Lily was much exercised when she heard of the Deputy Commissioner's prompt invitation for her friend. "He is not usually so ready with his tea-parties," she remarked. Then, glancing over at Crawford with her appealing black eyes: "He didn't say anything about *me*, did he?"

"No, not that I know of."

"You must look your very best, Helen," she resumed. "First appearances are everything; wear your Panama hat, and your white serge coat and skirt."

"I don't suppose Mr. Bennett will know what I've got on, but I shall wear the hat to please *you*."

Later that afternoon, when Bennett, from his veranda, saw Crawford approaching, accompanied by a tall fair girl, he said to himself: "I believe this is going to be a find!" On closer inspection the young lady proved to be pretty—she had a well-bred voice and charming manners; he felt at home with her immediately. Yes, and, so to speak, *safe*! This was not a young woman who would shadow his in-coming and out-going, pester him with notes, or stifle him with scent. Miss Crawford had a reserved air and a fair amount of self-possession; also he liked her clothes, especially the Panama hat, from underneath the brim of which a pair of dark blue eyes gravely surveyed him. He also noticed that she wore a thick gold bangle and uncommonly neat shoes. For her part, the girl was charmed with the Residency—the cool, pillared drawing-room had

an air of homely comfort; its deep arm-chairs, well-filled bookshelves, and square grand-piano; its black Bombay furniture and brass trays gave an Oriental touch to what otherwise might have been a sitting-room in some English country house. At Bennett's request she made tea from a Trichinopoly silver set, and they discoursed of the rains, the wonderful sunsets of Chitari, and the latest news from London. As Bennett caught the girl's eyes longingly fixed on the piano, he said :

"I'm sure you play and sing?"

"Yes," she admitted. "But not anything to boast of, and I have not touched a piano for months."

"Then please touch mine now," and he summoned his butler to remove the wadded cover which was a necessity to the instrument in the rains. Then he opened the instrument, and beckoned to her, saying :

"I am no critic, but I am fond of music, though really I know little about it, and am no performer—not even on a tin whistle. So you can play anything, and anyhow."

In reply to this encouraging invitation Helen seated herself at the instrument, and ran her fingers over the keys. It was a fine Scheidemayer, and she soon lost all sense of listeners, or nervousness, and played Mendelssohn's "Spring Song," one or two of Chopin's waltzes, and a short piece of Schumann's, and enjoyed her own performance. Mr. Bennett, who was obviously enchanted, now begged for a song.

As she hesitated, her father called out : "Sing us that thing from 'The Merry Widow.'"

This would not have been her own choice, but

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Helen obediently complied. When she came to the last note she glanced up at Bennett and said: "That's all for to-day!"

"Oh," he exclaimed, "then I hope we shall have a good deal more to-morrow, and a great many to-morrows. You have given me much pleasure. I believe this piano has not been played on for three years."

"But it is quite in good tune."

"Yes, I have it seen to. Mrs. MacNab does not possess a piano, and so I shall be glad if you will come over and use mine. It will be good for it—it wants playing on!"

"And it will be a great boon to me," said Helen. "Thank you. I will practise, if I may, when you are out."

"That will be in the morning, when I am at Cutcherry, but I hope you will also come when I'm in. Now, would you care to see my garden?"

"Yes, very much."

"I'm rather proud of it!" he said as he searched for his hat. "It was in a most horribly neglected state when I came—overrun by the whole community, and trampled down and devastated as if a herd of buffaloes had been let loose! However, I soon put an end to *that*."

"Oh, so you are going out!" exclaimed Crawford from the depths of a long cane chair. "You must excuse my accompanying you as I'm very happy here with the Europe mail and a first-class cigar," and, as he spoke, he subsided behind *The Times*.

The garden was approached through a short avenue lined with bamboos and hibiscus. It exhibited

a surprising expanse of beautiful green velvet turf, across the middle of which lay a broad walk, enclosed in pergolas. The borders of the lawn were lined with flowers and lattice-work, and the whole effect was one of bewildering beauty. What wonderful rosés, of all shades—cascades and curtains of roses—growing in the borders, or climbing the archways! After all, the *home* of the rose is in the East! The borders were also filled with quantities of English flowers in vigorous health—violas, carnations, sweet pea; but it was the Oriental plants that caught and held Helen's attention. What calladiums!—gorgeous clumps of leaves, as it were, brocaded in dark velvet or bright rose colour, or striped with pale green—every variety was represented; and as for the crotons—they stood tall and imposing in masses, plain or striped, in every shade of vivid orange, green, crimson. There was so much to behold on all sides—long, long borders, blazing with colour—that Helen felt dazzled—as if she could not see wood for the trees! In all her life she had never had an opportunity of visiting a really superior garden with a fine show of flowers, and here the garden and its contents were not merely fine, but superfine!

As a child, and as a young girl, Helen had lived in town, and yet she was sensible all the time of an instinctive passion for flowers—inherited no doubt. Occasionally, of a morning, she and her mother would go together to gloat upon Covent Garden, and there they would buy cheap plants and rear them in their rooms, or on their window-sills, with as much care and affection as if they were actually living

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things. If a plant looked sick, they sympathised; and if it died, they grieved.

As Helen's eyes first fell upon this brilliant scene, she halted for a moment, and could not restrain her admiration and delight. To her this Residency garden was a realisation of her dreams—the Garden of Eden, minus its wild beasts. Here, on the lawn, was a magnificent peacock, displaying his splendid train. Doves cooed in the mango trees. Flocks of paroquets flew across in brilliant green wedges. Grey squirrels abounded. Also there was the subdued tinkling sound of running water in the neighbourhood of a vast rockery, where masses of ferns, and particularly ~~maiden~~maidenhair, grew in extraordinary profusion. To the left of a blaze of colour lay the common, or kitchen-garden, exhibiting numbers of fruit-trees—oranges, guavas, mangoes, peaches; these latter were in bewildering abundance. At the foot of one large, heavily-laden tree was tied a small cat, who mewed plaintively.

"I've got to tie her here!" explained Mr. Bennett, "in order to keep off the grey squirrels who ravage these peaches."

"Oh, poor cat!" exclaimed Helen. "She does look miserable—and so thin!"

"All right, I'll release her—to please *you*," and he stooped down to untie the prisoner who vanished like a flash into the bushes; evidently she and her owner were not on speaking terms!

As the Deputy Commissioner paced the kitchen-garden he drew Helen's attention to his great beds of luscious lucerne, or ripening Indian corn, early potatoes, and a promising patch of English peas—

in all of which the lady evinced the deepest interest. Every step she took advanced her in her companion's good grace; she was such a charming, unaffected, sensible young woman—not one of your fly-away, chattering flappers! She played delightfully, and was uncommonly good-looking. Later on, as he watched father and daughter walking away from the Residency, he said to himself:

“That is the sort of girl that suits me.” Then he returned to his solitary seat in the veranda, lit a cigar, and spent more than an hour in agreeable and undisturbed meditation.

CHAPTER XVII

FOREST RIDES

DAY by day Lorna Taylor was sinking into deeper depression; she had no appetite, refused to dress herself or go out, and did not evince the faintest interest in her grandmother's farm, or, what was more surprising, her aunt's toilettes. She seemed to be gradually slipping into permanent melancholia; sat for hours, her hands loosely folded in her lap, gazing vacantly into space, with an air of indescribable dejection. Mrs. MacNab had consulted Mrs. Pereira, and finally Mr. Manfredo, the apothecary, who had given her tonics and advice, neither of which had any effect; no more had native herbs, or (surreptitiously administered) *charms*. At last Manfredo informed her grandmother that the girl must be sent away without loss of time. "Ek Dum! Ek Dum! What she wants is a change."

"A change?" repeated Mrs. MacNab. "Why, it is only a month since she came from England; where can I send her, my dear man?"

"Send her to where there is no end of noise and chatter and gaiety; to where she will be dragged out; forced to take an interest in life; rouse herself, dress, and go to bands and gymkhanas. She must be shaken out of this state, or she will go in the head and have to be put in a 'Poggie Khana.'"

Mrs. MacNab, justly alarmed by such a prospect,

bustled about to get Lorna under way, and in spite of the girl's frantic entreaties, her hysterical screams, and her clinging to Helen by main force, she was deported by her grandmother to Nagpur, there to stay with the de Costas—lively cousins, whose father was in the railway, and who had been given stringent orders to keep the invalid busy and amused, and never to leave her alone.

Mrs. MacNab's party was now reduced to four; she herself was incessantly occupied with the cultivation of her farm—every day the land seemed to have a stronger hold upon her; Lily spent most of her time sewing and dressing, arranging her hair, manicuring her nails, and making herself extra smart and attractive—for the benefit of Mr. Crawford. She had developed extravagance in the matter of expensive scents, hair-combs, and silk stockings. More than once she said to Helen :

"Oh, Helen, my dear, how awfully good-looking your father is; oh, my, he is the handsomest man I've ever seen! And I've seen hundreds and thousands."

"Now, Lily," protested his daughter, "that is nonsense!"

"But it is true. Dearie, do tell me—do you think he likes *me*?"

"Yes, I'm sure he does."

"Then, has he ever said anything—anything *nice*?" and she gazed into Helen's eyes and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Do tell me, sweetie!"

"I don't know what you call *nice*—he never discusses people; but I'm sure he likes *you*." And with this reply Lily was temporarily satisfied.

Miss MacNab engrossed Crawford's time as much as possible. Together they went for early walks, generally to the shops—Lily did not care for forest or field; in the afternoons they played tennis; and he now employed his empty hours in writing a history of Chitari. He bought a large, bound, manuscript book in the bazaar—such as is used by natives for their accounts—and with a stylographic pen spent hours of enjoyment—being for the moment (as usual) full of enthusiasm and confidence. Mrs. MacNab had supplied him with considerable copy in the shape of strange legends, startling native customs, and even a little scandal; his old schoolfellow had given him some hard facts, laughing all the time in his sleeve at the idea of a man who had been only three months in Chitari, and who did not know a word of the language, sitting down to write a history of the place. What astounding conceit and folly! However, it was an innocent waste of time; the fellow might be doing worse! And Crawford seemed to have settled into his niche, with something of the placidity of the contented monk.

The acquaintance between Bennett and the Crawford family had steadily increased to intimacy. Among such a small community they were bound to meet once or even twice daily; they played tennis on the Residency courts along with the Hydes, Lily, and the Pereiras. The Deputy Commissioner had thrown open his gates at last; otherwise, Helen and her father would have been bound to patronise the club. They generally made up two sets of an afternoon; sometimes with the Pereiras, sometimes with the Hydes. Mrs. Hyde was a vivacious, active

little woman, who made the best of life upon a narrow income. The Hydcs had two children in the Station and three at home, where their school expenses were heavy; and, consequently, economy was the rule in the forest officer's bungalow. Little Mrs. Hyde thoroughly enjoyed tennis, or, indeed, any variety, as an agreeable break in her long days of sewing, house-keeping, letter writing, and strenuous efforts to make two ends meet. She and the new "spin" had become very friendly, and Helen frequently went over to the Hydcs to give a little help with the children's lessons, or the sewing machine.

Mr. Bennett was an ardent tennis player, and when heated, in his flannels, presented a remarkable study in pink and white! Everyone played except Crawford, who was rather slack, and fond of shouting to his partner to "run—run!" However, Lily MacNab—almost a professional—was generally on his side, and retrieved his failures. Her slim, sinuous figure seemed ubiquitous; her wrists were supple, her serves masterly, her volleys deadly, and her activity untiring. It was noted that Mr. Bennett generally contrived to be Miss Crawford's partner, and that she and her father frequently dined at the Residency, occasionally accompanied by the greatly uplifted Lily! Subsequently there would be music and bridge. These little dinner parties were noted; what was the reason for such unprecedented hospitality in Chitari? The answer would have been shouted with one voice: "*Miss Crawford!*"

Naturally the Deputy Commissioner had a motor, and occasionally he took Miss Crawford and Mrs. Hyde for an outing; the great, smooth Trunk road

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made excellent going, and the big car carried them far afield. He also gave John Crawford some shooting, and either accompanied him or sent him forth with an experienced shikari and beaters; subsequently proud Crawford brought back deer, partridges, hares, and peacock, and laid them at the feet of Lily MacNab. Between tennis, shooting, and writing his time passed agreeably enough; he really asked for nothing better than to bask undisturbed in these Capuan quarters, enjoying a delicious sense of well-earned repose.

Besides taking Miss Crawford an occasional motor run—with a chaperone, Mr. Bennett suggested that she should learn to ride, and with this end in view he lent her a nice confidential pony, discovered a modern side saddle, and volunteered to be her escort and instructor.

It is scarcely necessary to mention that by this time the whole of Chitari—including the bazaar—had decided that the Deputy Commissioner was going to marry the "English Miss." The only person not aware of this fact being the "Miss" herself. She looked upon Mr. Bennett as her father's schoolfellow and contemporary, and considered his attentions as paternal; she liked him as a companion, he was so well read and easy to talk to; she enjoyed listening to his experiences; she also enjoyed her visits to his lovely garden, and rides on his smart bay pony.

Helen thoroughly appreciated their afternoon excursions, when they took their way by cart-tracks through waving yellow and green crops right into the forest-clad hills. The experience was both novel

and delightful; the cool evening breeze was laden with the fresh perfume of sweet-scented flowers and fragrant shrubs that bordered the track—and vainly struggled to hold their own among the broad-leaved teak, feathery bamboo, and stately sal. In the hour before sundown the woods resounded to the cries of peafowl and junglecock, the cooing of turtle doves; and from a distance would come the sound of axes, where the charcoal burners were still at work. The Deputy Commissioner took pride and pleasure in acting as guide and exhibiting the sights of his own district to his pretty and intelligent companion. Now it was a vast expanse of promising cultivation; again they would make their way among great forest trees, giant creepers, and a deep gloom—a gloom saturated with strange, aromatic odours, and enlivened by the myriads of fireflies who danced in the bamboos.

Together the couple inspected ancient forts, crowning hill-tops, their red sandstone battlements entangled and half covered with dense foliage. Once they had penetrated to the palace of the Gond kings, now a mass of broken masonry and chaos; once they made a pilgrimage to a vast sullen-looking building, still intact, the tomb of royalty; almost all the ruins had been forsaken and forgotten, or were vaguely known to cow-herds and trackers, being almost obliterated by the ever encroaching forest. Young trees and saplings which they had frowned on and dominated centuries ago had now overwhelmed and devoured them.

Whether coming or going, Helen Crawford felt as if she had been lifted into another existence and

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another sphere; at last she began to realise the potent spell of dim, mysterious India. Fortunate in her escort and interpreter, she could not have found one more capable than her present companion; he had the lore of the forest and the legends of the people at what are called his fingers' ends. He related exciting tales of Must elephants and man-eating tigers—of one especially which had for years "held up" a certain district, and was known as "the terror of the Korai Pass." The toll of his victims amounted to hundreds, his cunning and his courage were almost supernatural, and he was only killed in extreme old age.

Helen had soon learnt to manage the bay pony, being by no means lacking in nerve, and found that she was able to stick on, even when the animal executed an awkward shy, and at the same time give her attention to her escort. She really liked Robert Bennett, and accepted him as if he were a kind, indulgent uncle. Encouraged by his interest, she talked to him freely of her likes and dislikes, her childhood in Canada, and imparted ideas and opinions that she would have hesitated to share with her contemporaries—and, after all, why not? He was old, experienced, wise and paternal. Certainly, it was a pity that he was so painfully plain, and she, instinctively critical of appearances, possibly from her life-long association with "Beauty Crawford," avoided looking at her escort as much as possible—somehow, his was such a pink, pig-like countenance! His chin was too short, his nose was too wide, his eyes were so small, but they twinkled good-humouredly under white eye-

lashes. If the unfortunate Commissioner had an ugly visage, his tongue was of silver, for he talked delightfully and told her many unusual facts; but, as she listened enthralled, she kept her eyes steadily fixed upon her pony's coarse black mane, or the creeper-clad forest trees; for somehow his face discounted her pleasure; she felt deeply ashamed and conscience-stricken, but, do as she would, could not control her distaste.

As the couple rode along by country tracks, and through lonely, primeval villages, he imparted many thrilling facts respecting the natives of the country—especially the Korkus, the Gonds, and their kings. He enlarged on ruined fortresses—several of which they had visited—and their barbarous superstitions. One evening he touched on the subject of human sacrifices.

"Human! Not really!" exclaimed Helen. "How horrible!"

"Horrible, but true," rejoined Bennett. "My father, who was also in the Civil Service, heard of this from a friend who was present on one occasion; shall I tell you about it?"

"Yes, please, if it is not *too* gruesome."

"It was at a place called 'The Hero's Leap,' a high cliff over the river, and here the sacrifice—which is religious suicide—always took place."

"But why?" inquired Helen. "Who was to benefit by this?"

"I believe some of the poor fellows imagined that they would be Rajahs in the next transmigration; and they went very willingly to death!"

"Poor fellows, indeed!" exclaimed the girl.

"Yes. My father heard that the victim arrived, preceded by rude music and attended by an enormous following. First he prostrated himself before the idol, just a shapeless piece of granite daubed with scarlet paint; then he made an offering, a collection of pice and cowries; next, the priest gave him some ardent spirit in a coconut, which he drank, and offered an oblation; then he divested himself of a silver ring, and people pressed round to get him to touch their bangles. At last he left the spot, and with a firm step ascended to the peak, made a farewell salutation to the crowd, and in one manful leap vanished over the precipice!"

"How terrible!" exclaimed Helen.

"Yes. But as far as possible we have put an end to that sort of thing, though it is said to be occasionally carried on in some of the more ignorant native States."

"You said that the idol worshipped was just a block of granite, daubed with red; have I not seen one exactly like it in the garden?"

"You have. That stone is sacred to Mahadeo. I believe it has been there for centuries, and is a hideous eyesore in the midst of my beautiful flowers. One of my predecessors actually removed it, and was shortly after killed by a tiger, the result being that the stone was immediately restored. For my own part, I dare not touch it, not so much that I'm afraid of a tiger, but I know that I should not keep a single servant—they would depart in a body—and it's my belief that when I'm away from home the household make oblations to that block of granite, and even sacrifice a cock or two!"

"How astonishing!" exclaimed Helen. "How primeval and savage, and cruel!"

"You'll find many astonishing things out here."

"For instance, magic—do you believe in it?"

"Ahem"—clearing his throat—"there are strange sights that I cannot understand or explain; and though I'm not a believer I've witnessed incredible acts with my own eyes—including the basket trick. I remember once, soon after I first came out, a nearly-naked old man, with a tulwar and empty basket, and a small boy, came to the bungalow and, with many salaams, offered to do 'jadoo,' to which I agreed. My servants, and their relations, and their friends soon assembled *en masse* and made a circle about him. He seized the small boy, thrust him into the basket, and then gave it a dozen furious cuts with the tulwar. The shrieks of the child, and the yells of the servants, were appalling; undoubtedly it was murder! As I—a magistrate—was making up my mind to summon the police, the old man whipped up the basket; there was nothing in it, not even a spot of blood; he whistled, and from somewhere at the back of the stables the child appeared, unscathed and laughing. I saw this myself. If it is a trick, how it is done passes my comprehension."

When the Deputy Commissioner related this and other stories, Helen was enthralled; she could have listened to him for hours. He was so full of folklore, forest-lore, and ancient history, but when he occasionally introduced the personal element her interest undoubtedly flagged.

Now and then Mr. Bennett went on tour, and when he was absent Helen had the garden to herself,

save for the busy "mallies" who rose and salaamed profoundly whenever she appeared—possibly inspired with the idea of favours to come. Lily generally accompanied her, but got no farther than the Residency, where she strummed on the piano, or, having gorged herself with fruit, dozed in a long chair in the veranda; but Helen spent the happy hours in the garden. She loved the whispering bamboos and the wonderful tall lilies; the entire pleasance had completely won her heart, all but the scarlet-painted stone which she detested, nay, feared; and, in spite of herself, invariably hurried past it. Moreover, there was no doubt in her mind that the servants *did* offer sacrifices! Once she had noticed some marigolds; once some scraps of native sweets; and once, to her deep disgust, a bunch of white feathers!

More than a month had elapsed since Lorna had been deported to Nagpur, and apparently the change had more than fulfilled the hopes of Apothecary Manfredo. Letter number one, written immediately after her arrival, said:

"DEAREST, DARLING, SWEETIE HELEN,—How I miss you and Grannie, and Lily; how unhappy I am; oh, why am I alive—if only I were dead! My cousins are awfully kind; these poor girls mean well, but they will never leave me alone—no never. Oh, it is dreadful! To-day they are taking me to the band in the gardens, and having young men to supper—how I *dread* it! Write to me, my own sweetie, darling—write every day.—Your heart-broken
"LORNA."

The next letter, which arrived a week later, said :

"After all, Nagpur is a nice place—I do like it. I have never had a moment to write; we are always going somewhere, or doing something. My cousins do not like my black, and scold, and say that Charlie has been dead six months, and that I must—what they call—lighten mourning. So send me down my white silk dress and gold bangles by banghi post—just to please these tiresome girls. They keep me in such a hurly-burly—always running in and out. I hear you are *great* friends with the D.C.; do not forget to send me wedding-cake. No, dearie, of course, that is a joke—he is an old man. How I wish there were some nice young fellows in Chitari.—Your loving

"LORNA."

"P.S.—You may as well put my pink feather boa in the parcel."

CHAPTER XVIII

AN OFFER OF PROMOTION

IT must not be supposed that the little community of Chitari lived as heathen—for that matter, their heathen neighbours were excessively devout. On Sunday mornings Mr. Stock, the missionary, held a service in one of the rooms of the Court House. Here Mr. Bennett, who had studied elocution, read the lessons with remarkable effect. Mrs. Hyde played simple hymns on an aged harmonium, and Mr. Stock prayed at what seemed interminable length. Mr. and Mrs. Stock rarely associated with the European community; their work, or "field," as they termed it, was with native children in the school and the jungle. They were a worn, elderly pair, with long, sad faces, who looked older than their years, as if they never had sufficient to eat, and were members of the sect that believed all enjoyment to be sinful. They lived in a condition of perpetual self-sacrifice and "doing without." They never came to the Club, or played tennis, or Badminton; and, naturally, to the beauties of the surrounding country, they were as two blind creatures. If they dined at the Residency, or elsewhere, Mr. Stock opened and closed the repast with extempore prayer, praying in a loud sonorous voice, with closed eyes and long, folded hands, for "the back-sliders," "the hard of heart," and for those "doomed to eternal

damnation." The little community tolerated this good-humouredly, even when mentioned and warned by name, for they all realised how truly sincere and unworldly were this devoted and hard-working couple—members of a narrow creed, and a cast-iron school. When Mr. Stock, riding his thin Bazaar "Tat," departed on his rounds among the Korkus and forest-folk, Mrs. Hyde would visit his grass widow with recent picture papers and various innocent, amusing books, in order, as she said, "to keep the poor woman in sight of the big outside world." She would also take her fruit and cakes, and tempt the starved soul to taste of the flesh-pots and become a back-slider!

She declared to Helen that it made her truly sad to see two such worthy human beings finding no pleasure whatever in existence, for the Stocks somehow contrived to live bleakly in the midst of good-fellowship and sunshine—imprisoned in old formulas, and rigid rules.

Mr. Stocks liked Helen and tolerated Mrs. MacNab, though, in his opinion, she was "an ungodly woman." Kind Lucy Hyde came under his ban ever since he had seen her smoking a cigarette. As for the Deputy Commissioner, he looked upon him as a "lost soul," but Bennett was liberal with his money, and allowed him a peon, a tent and transport when he went to preach the Word and urge renunciation upon the poverty-stricken bamboo cutters, and charcoal-burners of the Satpuras.

Not a few Sundays had come and gone since the Crawfords were established at Chitari, and Crawford himself had adopted the manner and air of an old resident, and seemed to be anchored for life; this

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leisured existence was entirely to his taste, and he had no desire to cast off from such moorings.

"How long do you mean to stay here, Father?" was Helen's abrupt and startling question as she seated herself beside her parent under the tamarind tree.

"What do you mean?" he asked, putting down the book he was reading and surveying her with resentful impatience.

"Just precisely what I say! This is a dreadfully lotus-eating life. You and I are both idlers, are we not? And laziness eats into our very bones."

"It is a most agreeable laziness, and I confess I enjoy it," said Crawford stoutly. "I find it ten times better than working for hours in a stuffy London office, often by electric light, and always in bad air. Then coming home in a crowded 'bus to a gloomy little flat, and a fat mutton chop, and a soapy potato! No, no, my dear girl, give *me* Chitari!" As he spoke he drew in a long breath and waved his shapely hand in the direction of the fertile plains, now in process of cultivation, and the distant dark hills, clothed with densest forests. "We are all right as we are—leave well alone! We might go out of the frying-pan into the fire!"

"I don't call *this* a frying-pan!" protested his daughter.

"No, right you are!—more like the lap of luxury. What with the eggs, butter, and cream and curries here, I declare I am putting on flesh like anything. I must say Mrs. MacNab does us rattling well. Has she, by any chance, given you a hint that she wishes us to get a move on?"

"Oh, no, Mrs. MacNab would never do that, not even if she knew that we had decided to live, and *die*, under her roof!" and, having made this announcement, Helen rose and walked away, closely attended by her shadow—a yellow pi-dog.

Her father was a strange man, she said to herself. After all his enthusiasm, excitement and exertions, he appeared satisfied to subdue into a mofussil boarding-house at fifteen rupees a week! Surely he never intended to spend the rest of his life in remote Chitari? Yet, on the other hand, she dared not rouse his activities; it would be as dangerous as stirring an ant-heap to open up the question of the treasure; but Helen Crawford, as she and the pi-dog paced between the orange trees, was not aware of a wonderful secret which was shared between her father and Lily MacNab. The confederates were anticipating that events would gradually develop, and presently end in her marriage with the Deputy Commissioner. Crawford's hopes and plans hung on this, and though Helen had no suspicion of the truth the net was closing round her, for in every secret, subtle way Crawford and Lily tightened its cord. Without conspicuous effort, they contrived to leave Bennett and her alone as much as possible; they cautiously praised the Deputy Commissioner and talked of his high standing and probable promotion, his broad mind, his justice, and his liberality.

"What was Mrs. Bennett like?" inquired Helen on one of these occasions. "Did you ever see her?"

"No, my dear," rejoined Mrs. MacNab. "I believe she died in England some years ago. But someone who met her at Saugor told me that she was

a tall, plain woman, with money of her own, and very near-sighted—but that's of course!" she added with a laugh, whereupon both Lily and Crawford fell upon her as the champions of the Commissioner's appearance.

"He's not so plain at all," declared Lily.

"We never thought him *ugly* at school," supplemented Crawford.

"Oh, well," rejoined Mrs. MacNab, "I've no doubt he's a good man, but I say it to you—and I'd say it to his face—he's a very ugly one," and with this pronouncement she rose from the table and carried away the last word.

During these latter weeks Mr. Bennett had been careful to say nothing that would alarm his charming new friend, but on more than one occasion he had thrown out a feeler to her parent who instantly seized upon it and announced, with more than his usual bonhomie, that "it would be all right"; but he added :

"You must go slow, Bennett, and allow the idea to sink gradually into her mind. Helen has never had much to do with men; she is what you may call 'a woman's girl' and rather old-fashioned in some ways."

Subsequently conferring with himself, Crawford realised that it would suit him down to the ground to be the father-in-law to the Deputy Commissioner; naturally he would spend most of his time at the Residency. With this prospect in view, he was already acquiring an inflated sense of his personal dignity, and rather against Mrs. MacNab's wishes had set up a private body-servant—one Ahmed Khan

—price twelve rupees a month, and very, very cheap as Ahmed Khan declared, for a first-class butler who held a ten-year chit from his last master! Ahmed waited at table in spotless white coat and a gorgeous red and gold turban. He was a well-fed, sleek Mohammedan, with short, wiry, black whiskers and a peculiarly self-satisfied expression; possibly for this he had some grounds, as he proved to be a notable and clever servant, and Mrs. MacNab's cheap electroplate was made to shine like silver! He sewed—yes, and darned; he brushed, he tidied, he advised, and he listened. In the ever-talking Bazaar he had heard tales relating to Crawford's object in coming to India, and he soon rekindled the flame of the quest, and filled his Sahib's too-ready ears with fables of recovered treasure and fabulous riches of such vast extent that the Arabian Nights were simply not in it! Mrs. MacNab, an experienced housekeeper and first-class judge of character, secretly distrusted Ahmed—in spite of all his industry and silver-cleaning—and said to Crawford:

“For me, never do I like these English-speaking servants—in the hills—I would not engage. No, a fellow who came as khitmatgar with a lady—oh, my, whatt a rascal! He took her watch and diamond rings, my little pepper castors, and even the new crumb brush! Noa, noa—no English-speaking servants for me! But for you, Mr. Crawford, it is perhaps better, as you do not speak Hindi, and I will say Ahmed is always about when he's wanted and so may be arl right, for arl I know—and he may *not!*”

An impression that the Deputy Commissioner

would soon declare his suit was now in the air and generally discussed. At last it was brought to the notice of Helen herself. As she and Mrs. MacNab halted together on the boundary between two crops, watching the sowing of gram, and discussing the prospects of the karif crop—for by this time Helen was well versed in local farming—the latter suddenly turned to the girl and said :

"Missy, I would like to have two words with you"—glancing round—"now that we are alone." (The ploughman and his big white bullocks were a hundred yards away). "It is said that the Deputy Commissioner would like to marry Miss Crawford."

"Marry *me!*" ejaculated the girl. "What a ridiculous idea—Chitari must be short of gossip; why, he is as old as father. If this came to Mr. Bennett's ears, *how* he would laugh!"

"No, no, my child, he would not laugh, for he is serious. He lends you his pony, does he not? He takes you out in his car; he is always calling you to his house and sending you books and fruit. Yes, it would be a great match—that's so!"

"Oh, Mrs. MacNab, please——" began Helen.

"Only one little moment for *me*"—laying her solid hand upon the girl's arm—"and then I am done. I know that the Deputy Commissioner is as old as Mr. Crawford—and you are young. Your youth is yet to spend—may you spend it well and happily. Of course Mr. Bennett is a Burra Sahib; but if you come and ask for *my* advice—remember this, Missy, I say *no!*"

"And so shall I, Mrs. MacNab," rejoined Helen with a laugh.

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"Your father wishes it—that one can see with half an eye," continued her companion, poking her stick into the ground. "Of course, it would suit *him*."

"Oh, no, no; he would never wish me to be the wife of his old school-fellow. I am sure that he would look upon the whole idea as *too* ridiculous; so it is just a bazaar 'shave,' and you know what that is worth?"

Mrs. MacNab shook her head till her great topi waggled and said: "Arl right, my dear, you wait—and we shall *see*! I'd rather have the 'black rust' in my rabi crop than you marry that Bennett. Nareeyan Ram (the head man) says 'no rust this year.' I say 'no marriage with Mr. Bennett ever.'"

If Mrs. MacNab said "no" to the prospected engagement, her daughter Lily, on the other hand, pronounced a most emphatic "*yes*." Curling herself about Helen in her usual clinging, caressing fashion, she murmured to her:

"I suppose you know that Mr. Bennett is in love with you, darling, sweetie? He's a dear, good man! He will be a Commissioner one day, and you will have scarlet liveries and an aide-de-camp to sit opposite you in the carriage. Bennett has private means, too; oh, my, you *are* a lucky girl!"

Helen laughed off Lily's congratulations as a joke, politely extricated herself from her scented embrace and, picking up an umbrella, set out to walk over to the Forest Officer's bungalow and finish a little frock on the sewing-machine. Having watched her departure, Lily went to Crawford, who was lounging under the tamarind tree, and related the late conversation with much animation. Then they laid their

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heads together and had a long confidential conversation, the result of which was that that evening Crawford invited his daughter to come and take a little turn in the garden. Putting his arm round her shoulder, he said in his most confidential tone :

"I just want a little private talk, my dear child. I suppose you can see how the land lies?"

"What land?" she asked sharply.

"Well, all that land," waving his hand in the direction of the Residency. You know, you have only to hold up a finger and you will be the Deputy Commissioner's Mem Sahib!"

"I think you are mistaken, Daddy; perhaps the wish is father to the thought. But, anyway, I do assure you that I shall not put out a finger. I'd sooner it were cut off!"

"Now, do be serious, my darling girl," he urged, taking a tighter hold of her arm. "You cannot afford to turn your back upon such a piece of extraordinary good fortune! Remember that you have no relations on either side of the house. Your mother's people quarrelled with her—my own cut me off with the proverbial shilling. So there are in the world but the two of us, and we stand or fall together. We have no money and no prospects. Now you—the daughter of a tuppenny halfpenny clerk—are offered a splendid position, and will have it in your power to give *me* a home! Bennett and I agree admirably; we have the same politics, we like the same cigars and whisky, and have lots of ideas in common. Somehow, I always had a notion that India would bring me luck, and here it is!"

"Father!" exclaimed Helen, forcibly removing

his hand and turning to face him, "I really cannot imagine what nonsense you've all got into your heads—Mrs. MacNab, Lily, and now *you*. Mr. Bennett is a nice old thing, and we are good comrades—that is all. Why, you and he were school-fellows—he is *your* friend, not mine. Your idea—excuse me—is preposterous!"

"And do you think that it is because of me that Bennett lends you a pony, invites us continually to his house, gives me shooting, and keeps you supplied with all the new books and the pick of his garden? Bah! None so blind as those who won't see!"

"Well, anyway, I don't intend to *see*," replied Helen with unusual vehemence. "And if there is to be gossip, and whispering, and nodding, and nudging, and all that sort of thing, I promise you that I shall never go near the Residency again!" and as she spoke she confronted her parent with sparkling eyes and a rising colour."

"Oh, well, there is no need to lose your temper!" he said querulously.

"I've not lost my temper, Dad, but I certainly shall, and badly, if I ever hear any more of this talk. Perhaps you might mention this to *Lily*," and she walked off.

Events were gathering. The very next evening, as Helen rode with Mr. Bennett—a ride she had vainly endeavoured to evade—he himself broached the subject soon after they had faced homewards. Possibly stirred and supported by the intimacy of the forest, he turned on her a glowing pink countenance, and said:

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"Miss Crawford, I am about to say something that may startle you!"

"Now it is coming!" thought Helen, clenching her hand upon the reins.

"Possibly you have not noticed—but others have, how deeply I care for you! These last months have been the happiest I've known for *years*, for you are not only young, charming and accomplished, but so companionable, and this, to a solitary fellow like myself, has been an inexpressible pleasure. I dare to ask you to marry me, with all my drawbacks, because you have told me, with your frank and delightful confidence, that you have never been in love! I know that I am old in comparison with you and am only too conscious of my painful ugliness! Sometimes, when you and I have been walking in my garden, I've said to myself, we embody 'Beauty and the Beast.' On the other hand, I'm easy to live with, I come of good family, I'm well off, and I promise you most solemnly that you shall do with me, and my life, as you will! I'd retire from the Civil Service, return home, and take you about and fulfil your wish of seeing the world—Italy, Spain, Egypt—in short, wherever your fancy led! At the same time, I would worship you, without expecting your love; I would be satisfied with your companionship and friendship——" he paused, and for a moment there was no sound save the thudding of the ponies' hoofs upon the dry forest road.

After considerable hesitation, Helen gasped out: "Oh, Mr. Bennett! I don't know what to say! You are very good—I do like you—and father——" here her voice failed.

"Yes, your father would give us his blessing; and, speaking to you frankly, I must point out that at present you are in a precarious position, tied to an erratic parent who has no ballast, and, though a dear, good chap, is at heart a rolling stone, or rather, a weather-cock blown about by every contrary wind. Now, when you are married to me, he will have a permanent home. I am, you see, bringing up all my forces to back me, though I'm afraid it's but a forlorn hope!" He paused, and his soul seemed to stare at her out of his ugly little eyes.

To this avowal she made no reply; mentally she felt stunned.

"Look here, Miss Crawford," he continued, "I don't want to rush you! Will you leave the matter in suspense, and take a month to think over things; meanwhile, let us go on precisely as usual, and if the answer should be 'no'—well, I must bear it as I have borne other troubles. Do you agree?"

Helen bent her head in assent. Bennett was a clever man and spoke advisedly. What he had hinted respecting her father sunk into her mind with unexpected force. It was true that they were strangers in the land, indeed all but paupers, with no prospects, no solid foothold in India. Her mother, on the last day of her life, had implored her to stay by her father; undoubtedly her mother was too well aware of his impulsive, erratic and restless nature, and alas, he was both untrustworthy and irresponsible.

Once she was the mistress of a substantial home and income her father would be safely moored. Now she never knew what he would do; she appeared to have no control over him. Only this very morning

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she received a large bill from a gentlemen's outfitter, accompanied by a note which said "that Mr. Crawford had requested them to furnish the account to *her*." The account was for three hundred rupees! When she had shown this note and bill to her parent he had glanced over it, shrugged his shoulders, and calmly exclaimed:

"Robbers! All the same, my dear girl, I cannot go without clothes—if I did I should be taken up by the police!" and, having made this pronouncement, he subsided into a chair in the veranda along with a cigarette and a two days' old *Pioneer*.

CHAPTER XIX

A NIGHTMARE

HELEN made no allusion to her proposal from Mr. Bennett, and as the bay pony was led away from the veranda and she walked up the steps, there was nothing in her appearance to indicate that anything unusual had taken place. At supper she held hints and innuendoes at bay, and calmly discussed a certain old fort and a particularly gorgeous sunset; but all that night her brain was working; she was marshalling her vision of the pros and cons, and she decided that the next day she would carry her trouble to Mrs. Hyde—to Mrs. Hyde, who had alienated her relations, and in spite of their threats and warnings had married for love.

The forest officer's bungalow was spotlessly neat, but poorly and shabbily furnished. Here and there might be noticed scraps of salvage—indications of a far different and wealthier home. Helen had observed a silver clock, a fitted dressing-bag, tortoise-shell hairbrushes, and a few handsomely bound books. The children's clothes were made by Mrs. Hyde; also her husband's shirts, and the cheap cretonne covers which set off the bare little sitting-room, in which the only article of value was the aforesaid silver clock. Mrs. Hyde kept no dirzee, no ponies, not even a bullock tonga; but hired in the bazaar when occasion required, and was just as poor as the

proverbial church mouse, but rich in the love of her husband and children.

She was established in the veranda, darning an old tablecloth, when Helen entered and sat down beside her.

"The children are asleep," said Mrs. Hyde, "so we must not *laugh* too much."

"As it happens I am not in a laughing humour," said Helen as she removed her topi.

"No?" rejoined her friend, looking at her. "I see there is something on your mind!"

"Yes, a heavy load, and it happens to be Mr. Bennett."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Hyde, putting down her work. "So then he has spoken?"

"Yesterday afternoon, when we were riding back from Harchand Point. He has offered to wait a month for my answer."

"So that you may look before you leap?"

"I suppose so."

"And what do you *see*, my dear? Have you gazed into the abyss?"

"Since you ask me, I see a plain, elderly man, who is kind and well off, and declares that he is extremely fond of me, and will allow me to do whatever I please. He will give me a charming home——"

"And the garden!" supplemented Mrs. Hyde. "Helen, you know you are in *love* with that garden!"

"Yes; I believe I am, in a way—and, of course, I could provide for father. Since father has had nothing to do, but smoke and write piffle, he has become so unsettled and irresponsible, and you know that I've only a hundred a year, which does not go

far for *two*. Mr. Bennett has influence with father : this counts, and—and—I like Mr. Bennett.”

“Oh, yes; and for that matter, so do I. My dear child, I know that it is not for me to venture to advise, especially with regard to such a critical question. I may, however, state my own case. I was very nearly engaged to a very rich *parti*, and my family were enchanted; then all at once Robbie came home. His sister happened to be my greatest friend. We met, and here I am! It is true that we are horribly poor, but I’ve never once regretted becoming Lucy Hyde. Money is not everything. How can one go through the world with an empty heart? When I announced my engagement my people were furious, for Robbie had only his pay. I am not forgiven, even yet! They take no notice of my three boys at home, and it would be such a great matter to me if my people would have them for the holidays; schooling is an awful pinch. I must say that mother now and then does send me out a ten-pound note, which is soon swallowed up in my bazaar bills. However, within the next two months Robbie’s promotion is due, and he will have a considerable increase of income; and one of my cousins pays for Tom, my youngest boy. Is it not good of him? And he a bachelor! By the way, he came out with you on board ship; his name is Harvey Strong.”

“Oh, yes; and is *he* your cousin?”

“I mentioned your name in a letter, and he told me that he knew you.”

“Did he tell you that he knocked me down the cabin stairs and nearly broke my neck?”

“No; but he is coming to stay with us shortly,

and you can square up accounts. We shall put him in a tent and feed him on curry and roast peacock."

After rather a long silence, Helen said: "And so you think that I should say 'No' to Mr. Bennett?"

"I think that he is twenty-eight years older than yourself—that's my chief objection. I'm aware that he is well thought of in the district; his servants stay a long time in his service: they like him."

"But not his animals?" interposed Helen with energy. "I have seen him thrashing a dog as if he rather enjoyed it!"

"More than the dog did!" exclaimed Mrs. Hyde.

"And one day, when we were motoring, we ran over a kid and killed it. Lily cried, but Mr. Bennett was not one bit sorry."

"Well, whatever he may be to animals, he is kind to people. I happen to know that he entirely supports a blind old man in the Bazaar, so you might mark that down against the kid!"

"There is more than the kid," murmured Helen. "I do not intend to tell anyone about Mr. Bennett's proposal yesterday."

"You may trust me, my dear; mum is the word! Come here when you can, and talk over the matter with me, and blow off steam; it will be better than keeping a bubbling kettle with the lid on."

For several days matters proceeded as usual. There was the daily early walk; but Helen avoided the Residency garden and piano. What was unavoidable was afternoon tea and tennis; but here there was no hint in Mr. Bennett's manner of that important avowal during the forest ride. Presently he was obliged to leave the station for a whole fortnight

on a tour of inspection, and during his absence Helen Crawford ranged his garden as before. There was something in it that seemed to lure and hold her as with a spell. Almost insensibly she arranged within her mind alterations and improvements she would make; she loved the garden, as she had confessed to her friend Mrs. Hyde. Somehow, when she entered it, she appeared to stand on the verge of another existence; a hitherto undiscovered country; a paradise of sunshine, birds, flowers, and peace. She also loved the dear old bungalow, with its cool, home-like drawing-room, and she felt she might be happy and contented there. Yet, was it possible, she asked herself, that a girl of her age, in possession of her senses, could bring herself to marry an elderly man simply for the sake of his house and garden? After hours of pacing the said garden, after marshalling all the pros and cons in deliberate review, Helen Crawford decided that nothing he could offer would induce her to be the wife of the Deputy Commissioner. His mind attracted her admiration and respect, but his outer man—the idea of a closer intimacy made her figuratively curl up and shrivel like any sensitive plant—every fibre of her being resisted and rebelled against the marriage.

How she dreaded the moment when she must utter the fatal “no”; she foresaw the change it would work in her present life and surroundings. Her father would be disappointed, so would Lily; the rides and tennis parties must come to an end; all the same, she must and would, be guided by her own convictions, and hold to her liberty with both hands.

One night she had a curious dream, which she

related to her confidante, Mrs. Hyde, the following day.

"It was more like a nightmare," she declared. "I suppose I had gone to sleep thinking of the bulbuls, the roses, the lilies, and the giant jasmine, which just now is in the greatest perfection, and all at once I found myself standing on the lawn alone, and yet I had a horrible conviction that there was something evil lurking among the shrubs, and then I saw the block of painted granite rolling very quickly towards me, and I ran for my life! In and out, and round and round, and up and down, through the pergolas; and fast as I ran, I felt that this frightful pursuer was gaining upon me! At the same time I became aware that the whole garden was gradually changing and being transformed. The mango, orange trees and the tall bamboos were dwindling away. The roses and jasmine had withered and disappeared; all the beauty of the spot had been wiped out as if by a great sponge, and I was racing through a barren desert. And then I was caught! I felt the stone actually pressing on my shoulder, and I woke with a piercing scream; after all, it was only Lily thumping me on the back and telling me that my bath was ready."

"They say that morning dreams come true," remarked Mrs. Hyde. "Your dream may be a warning."

Meanwhile the MacNab household figuratively held its breath—and tongue—on the subject of the anticipated engagement. Crawford and Lily were convinced that Bennett had spoken, and they warily avoided the remotest allusion to the Deputy Commissioner, aware that a chance word or look might

startle Helen, and that at present the situation seemed to hang by the proverbial hair.

Strange to say, in spite of her dream and her resolve, Helen still continued to haunt the Residency grounds. Somehow she could think best and most clearly when there and alone; she was making the most of her opportunity, for well she knew that once she had spoken the irrevocable "no," this lovely spot would be closed to her for ever.

As she paced the green turf one exquisite evening, when the scent of the roses and the perfumed shrubs were heavy in the air, she heard approaching steps and voices, and looking up beheld, emerging into the white lustre of the moonlight, Mrs. Hyde and Harvey Strong.

CHAPTER XX

WELL MET!

HARVEY STRONG came forward with his cousin to meet Helen, with the agreeable anticipation of renewing a friendship which had flickered into existence during those last days on board ship. As he gazed into her smiling face, he found the improvement in her appearance almost startling. A complete freedom from household cares, the interesting, novel life, and hours spent daily in the open air, had all combined to make Helen what nature had intended her to be: a graceful girl, with a charming individuality, and undeniable good looks.

After an interchange of friendly greetings, Harvey Strong and Helen strolled round the garden together—Mrs. Hyde went on to visit the Storks—where she pointed out to the new arrival special groups and beauty spots with as much pride as if she were actually mistress of the domaines. Presently he asked:

"I say, Miss Crawford, why didn't you answer my last letter?"

"Oh, there was so much to describe," and she waved her hand round the horizon, "or else there was so little to say, that I thought it better to choose a middle course—and not write at all."

"I see!" and he looked at her thoughtfully. "Well, has India realised your expectations?"

"Far more than realised!" she answered with

emphasis. "Since I came here, I can better understand the spell of the East."

"Yes, it gets hold of most people. What, to you, is the particular charm?"

"Everything; the people; the climate; the scenery. You have seen the forests?"

"Rather; my work has been among them for months at a time."

"And the great, flowing plains and blue horizon; the trees; the vegetation; the animals; and the birds?"

"There are a good few of both round Chitari. Peacocks in thousands; jungle-cock; doves; and a few tiger."

"I know; one day Mr. Hyde showed me fresh pugs in the sand—beside a pool. He is a renowned shikari."

"Yes, and more than some are—a dead shot! He shoots to kill, and not to leave an unfortunate, wounded animal, to suffer torture and starvation."

"What a frightful picture; I never thought of that!"

"Don't; it's not a pretty impression. And so you like the people?"

"I do; they are so simple and dignified—especially the village folk. I can talk a little Korku, and make out with signs. I've had lifts on 'chukrums,' with little, trotting bullocks, backwards and forwards to Mrs. MacNab's villages. I take messages, and I feel I am getting to know the folk a tiny bit; anyhow, the children appreciate chocolate and candy, and I've a double-jointed thumb, which they all admire—it is said to be so lucky!"

" 'Better be born lucky than rich.' "

"Talking of riches—have you heard anything of Mr. Hawkins?"

"Yes, but not for a good while."

"I suppose it's a case of a *stamp*?"

"Very likely," and he laughed with sudden, ironical amusement. "But, do you know, I rather like the old boy!"

"No——?"

"But yes. It's a pity he has this mania and is such a cruel tyrant to himself, for he has a fine big brain, and is as straight as a die."

"It really is pathetic to see anyone so fond of money and hoarding," said Helen. "After all, what good can it do Mr. Hawkins? He denies himself half the comforts of life."

"I suppose there must be something in it," rejoined Strong, "or else there would not be so many misers in the world."

And so the pair walked and talked, discussed and argued, agreeably conscious of a sense of companionship, till a gurrah in the bazaar, supplemented by Mrs. Hyde, warned them of the hour.

Immediately outside the Residency they encountered Crawford, who was delighted to welcome his late fellow-passenger. He always appreciated a new face, or any change, and then and there gave Strong a cordial invitation to dine with him at Mrs. MacNab's.

"Whether Sunday or Monday," he added, "the old lady always gives you a rattling good dinner."

"I'm not specially tempted by the good dinner," said Strong. But, rather to Helen's surprise, he added: "I accept with pleasure."

"Our evening meal is at half-past seven—don't dress. Well, if you like, change your coat; that will be all right."

"As long as I don't turn it!" rejoined Strong, with a laugh. And in response to Mrs. Hyde's murmur of "children's bedtime," the cousins hurried away.

Mrs. MacNab and Lily made special preparations for Crawford's guest, who was also the cousin of Mrs. Hyde, and the result was a delectable meal and much animated talk. Conversation was chiefly supported by Crawford—who liked to talk, and was never interested in what his companion had to say—with a little assistance from Strong; and Lily's watchful, glittering eyes were fastened on the newcomer, with a mixture of admiration and speculation. Yes, he was young, good-looking, and very much the gentleman; but not nearly as handsome as her *own* friend!

"Our big man is away just now," explained Crawford. "He and I happened to be schoolfellows; the world is a small place. At present Bennett is on tour, and I must confess that we miss him pretty badly."

"Oh, Bennett, did you say? Bob Bennett? I've met him in Jubbulpore. I saw his garden this evening. It's a sight; a glorious show!"

"Yes, and he gives us the run of it! But no dogs or children admitted; we always play tennis on his kunker courts; and I hereby challenge you to a match to-morrow afternoon."

The challenge was accepted, though Strong declared that he was a long way below his usual form, and very short of practice.

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On the whole the stranger made an excellent impression on Mrs. MacNab, Lily, and, indeed, the whole company. Helen thought him wonderfully improved—no longer gruff, abrupt, and reserved. He laughed and talked and let himself go just like other people. Crawford accompanied his guest back to the Forest Bungalow—this was the Chitari mode of speeding the parting guest—and on their way the latter said :

"I didn't see Mrs. Taylor this evening, and, somehow, I didn't like to inquire for her ! You know that everything is so *sudden* in this country, and she always seemed hysterical and queer."

"Oh, she's all right now," responded Crawford. "She has got over her grief, and by all accounts is having an A1 time in Nagpur—dances, and no end of gaieties."

"It must be pretty dull here for your daughter, isn't it ?"

"Not at all ; Helen has never been accustomed to society, and she loves Chitari. Of course, when the Deputy Commissioner is at home things are a bit more lively : he motors her about, lends her a pony ; there is tennis in the evening ; and he gets up stacks of new books. Besides this, Helen is uncommonly chummy with your cousin, and, taking one thing with another, is as happy as the day is long."

Two days later Mr. Bennett returned ; but he did not look either happy, or even pleased, when he presented himself unexpectedly on the tennis ground and beheld a vigorous match in full swing, and an active young man, who was Helen's partner, playing up to the net with astonishing skill. However, he

dissembled his feelings, and on recognising Strong gave him the usual genial Indian welcome and offered to "put him up." But Strong, having thanked him with equal cordiality, declined.

"It is most awfully good of you, but I've only three or four days more, and it's hardly worth while to move, especially as, I believe, my cousin would not allow me to shift my quarters."

"Oh, please yourself," said Bennett. "At any rate, you will come and dine." Then turning to Mrs. Hyde, he said: "I should like to give a dinner for your cousin—he and I have met before, and to celebrate his visit I shall invite the station."

"That means twelve if you have the two boys from the dāk bungalow; the missionaries never dine out," said Lily. "Oh, *how* nice! Dear Mr. Bennett, do let us have a real tamasha!"

"Tamasha? What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Oh, anything for a change; a fancy-dress dinner would be no end of fun, finishing up with fireworks. You know we can easily manufacture our dresses, and get all the stuff in the bazaar. The costumes would be little or no expense, everyone would work at their character in secret, and we would all meet at dinner as one grand surprise packet!"

This suggestion was applauded and accepted, and a loud babble of talk immediately ensued. It was not often that poor little Chitari—so out of the world among its pastures, crops, and forests—had such an interesting and harmless topic for discussion.

During the next few days there were secret conferences, and many mysterious visits to the bazaar—generally in couples.

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A delightful picnic tea in the forest was given by Mrs. Hyde. This was followed by a solemn tiffin offered by Mrs. MacNab, the subsequent effects of which were such that the guests remained in a torpid condition until sundown. Undoubtedly the arrival of Strong had inaugurated the Chitari season ! He and Helen went together for early morning walks, merely chaperoned by the yellow pi, for at this hour Mrs. Hyde was unable to be on duty as her time was claimed by nursery and cook, Crawford was never an early bird, and Lily was engrossed in dress-making. Helen introduced her companion to the principal local views and objects of interest, and together they discussed books, places, and people, and time passed with incredible rapidity. Here was a different companionship for her; a marked contrast to that of Mr. Bennett; equally interesting, but more stimulating—with the natural affinity of youth and high spirits.

Besides acting as guide to Mrs. Hyde's cousin, Helen gave valuable assistance in the matter of cutting out garments and manufacturing costumes with the aid of the sewing machine. The Forest Bungalow was about to contribute four characters: Strong, his host and hostess, and little Betty Hyde, aged seven, who, for once in her life, was to sit up for dinner and pretend to be a rose fairy. Helen and Strong made joint excursions into the bazaar, where they carried out commissions, and made extensive purchases in velveteen, coarse lace, cotton-backed satin, red saloo, and gold tinsel. (Articles suitable for fancy costumes are cheap and easily provided in Eastern bazaars.) The business of bargain-

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ing and talk was undertaken by Strong, who spoke the language with fluency; it was not often that Chitari saw a strange Sahib buying women's stuff such as needles and thread, and even whalebone, and quite a little crowd accompanied him and Miss Crawford from stall to stall. One of the sharp-eyed throngs noted that he purchased, when the young lady was engrossed in coloured satins, a heavy bangle of beaten gold. What did he intend to do with it? It was too small for a man.

The characters, and their dresses, were supposed to be veiled in impenetrable mystery. Helen, who shared in all the secrets of the Forest Bungalow, was left entirely in the dark as to her father's, Lily's, and Mrs. MacNab's attire on the supreme occasion; they were intended to be a staggering surprise. As for Helen's own costume, nothing could be simpler—she proposed to represent a smart English parlour-maid.

In Mrs. MacNab's bungalow were two "coolie dirzees" sewing as if for dear life; the "tryings-on" took place in the seclusion of the Dufta. Meanwhile the steps and veranda were littered with scraps of all manner of colour and materials, and one of Anne's long-legged gamecocks was chased by envious fowl as he bore away in triumph a long pennon of gold tinsel in his beak.

The Deputy Commissioner was at present much occupied with official returns, and had entrusted the matter of his costume to his butler and to Mrs. Hyde; but one evening he contrived to spare time to carry off Helen for her usual ride, and she was his most reluctant companion. As Strong stood and watched the pair depart together—the stout, square figure

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on a grey pony, the slim girl riding a bay—he turned to his cousin and said :

“So I see that old Bennett has come out in a new character—as ladies’ man.”

“Oh, yes,” assented Mrs. Hyde; “but has he ever been otherwise? At one time, we feared that Lily MacNab would catch him; certainly her efforts were unsparing. She was always shadowing him and lying in wait for him; in short, she frightened the poor old fellow so badly that he actually bolted to the hills.”

“Oh, wise man! But it strikes me that Miss Lily has marked down yet another victim.”

“If you mean Mr. Crawford—yes.”

“That would be monstrous,” declared her companion, with unusual vehemence.

“I don’t see that at all,” argued his cousin. “Lily is remarkably handsome; never have I seen such eyes——”

“Yes, she has deadly eyes! I give you that.”

“She is good-tempered, and absolutely devoted—as possibly you may have noticed?”

“The girl has native blood!”

“I’m not denying that, but it is good blood; the same as that of the Bhundara family, and let me whisper to you that fair, dark Lily will have money. Mrs. MacNab is rich; last week she bought another piece of land, which includes four villages.”

“But what would Miss Crawford say to the match? How would she like to be Miss MacNab’s step-daughter, and Mrs. MacNab’s step-granddaughter?”

“I’m quite sure that Helen would not object; she is devoted to Anne MacNab. Of course she will

marry some day, and it will be a good thing for her to have her parent taken off her hands. John Crawford is rather of the same family as the notorious 'old man of the sea,' and she is obliged to contrive and humour him and keep him within bounds; he enjoys ease—at the expense of others—idleness, *and* spending money; he is like Dickens's 'Skimpole'—but not so amusing or accomplished!"

"I don't see much temptation to spend money here—not even in your grand bazaar!"

"That's true; but perhaps you've heard that there is such a thing as a parcel post? Have you not noticed his smart grey suit and beautiful brown shoes?"

"I have. And what about the fabulous fortune?"

"It has fizzled out; his expectations are extinct. The Pagoda tree is bare! I rather fancy he made the whole thing up as an excuse for coming out to India, where life is easier than in a London office."

"That is quite a sound idea! All the same, on board ship his one topic and idea, between meals, was his uncle's 'fabulous fortune.' And so he found nothing in Lucknow?"

"No; on the contrary, I believe he lost every penny he brought out from home, and arrived here with an absolutely empty pocket."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Strong, and for a moment he could find nothing further to say.

"Helen has a little income of her own," continued Mrs. Hyde; "barely enough to keep them both at the MacNabs, where they are, so to speak, money bound; they cannot afford to move!"

"But what did Crawford do with the coin he

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brought out with him? He told me he had a nest egg."

"I cannot inform you, nor account for his missing rupees; but I have a vague idea that he got into some gambling set. Helen never exactly told me; but there are silences which speak!"

"So she confides in you, Lucy?"

"Yes, we are great friends; she is a dear, good, unselfish girl, and a wonderful comfort to me."

"A dear, good girl who is wasting her life here! Does Miss Crawford propose to live and die at Chitari?"

"I hope not, with all my heart. I hope that other proposals may be put forward."

"Ah!" he said. "Well, look here, Lucy; you are my cousin, and I propose to make you my confidante. I am thinking of getting settled."

"I am delighted to hear it. Do not put off matrimony, as some do, until you are old and grey, and fixed in your ways. Who is the lady?"

"The lady is Miss Crawford—as I think a woman of your intelligence might have guessed. I like her better and better every day I know her."

"Oh!"

"It's a fact. Now the question is—dare I venture to propose on such a short acquaintance? Board ship scarcely counts, for until I flung her down the cabin stairs we hardly exchanged a syllable. I took a passage in that miserable old ditcher so as to have complete leisure for my work, and I gave the two girls who were on board a particularly wide berth; I believe they thought me a brute and a bear, which suited me rather well. But now——" and he paused.

"But now, it would not at all suit you for Miss Crawford to imagine you a brute or a bear. As for venturing upon the great question—you are the best judge of that yourself. I do not know how far your acquaintance has advanced beyond early walks in the forest and spending hours over my commissions in the bazaar. As for confidential communications—tennis offers no opportunities."

"No, but I shall make one!" he declared 'with decision.

As later in the evening Mrs. Hyde noticed Helen promenading on the Residency lawn between two men, both of whom wished to marry her, the little lady said to herself:

"I wonder, oh, I do wonder, which it will be?"

As she and her cousin Harvey strolled home in the dusk he said: "Tell me, Lucy, is there anything up between Miss Crawford and Bennett?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know. Of course, the loan of a man's pony means nothing out here, but I've noticed him contemplating her with a proprietary eye. She is remarkably attractive, and I've no doubt he would like to marry her."

"Possibly he would," was the evasive reply.

"But what about Miss Crawford's sentiments?"

"Do you think I would divulge them if I knew? However, as you see, Bob Bennett is the Deputy Commissioner—a Heaven-born."

"But a Heaven-born as old as her father!" interrupted Strong, in a tone of acute annoyance.

"Why, the girl is only two-and-twenty!"

"What about an old man's darling?"

"But to what an ugly old man ! No, no, I'm not afraid."

"Then I gather that you have good conceit of Harvey Strong ; perhaps this is on the strength of your recent promotion ?"

"Perhaps it is ; anyhow, I've got the offer of a first-class job in the hills ; entirely in my own line ; it has to do with tanks and water-power."

"The hills would be a most suitable place in which to begin your housekeeping," remarked Mrs. Hyde as she stepped into her own veranda.

CHAPTER XXI

CRAWFORD AS "ANANIAS"

THE grand Burra Khana duly took place. The Residency *chef* summoned assistance from the Bazaar; the cook-house was thronged with helpers, eager to enjoy a general Huka and the occasional tasting of good things, dipping into the pots and Deckshies with audacious fingers. The dinner was excellent: soup, fish, chickens, Europe ham, savouries and iced puddings; the table was loaded with piles of delicious fruit and lovely flowers, and the champagne was circulated briskly.

Mr. Bennett, attired as Cromwell—the Lord Protector—presented a somewhat ridiculous figure. He received his guests in a khaki coat, a broad leather belt—borrowed from a chuprassi—top-boots, cords, a Terai hat, and sword; and in order to make the picture historically correct he had painted the representation of a large wart upon his face—and considered himself an unqualified success!

The Lord Protector was really enchanted with the smart and pretty Parlour-maid in her black gown and saucy cap and apron.

"Oh, Mary Ann, you carry me back to London!" he exclaimed as he beamed upon her with a broad smile; but the smile faded when he beheld Harvey Strong arrayed as a handsome Cavalier and really looking the part, in satin, velveteen, white lace

ruffles, and a pair of Mrs. Hyde's best silk stockings.

Mrs. Hyde herself was a fascinating Red Riding-hood; her husband was suitably transformed into a gallant Robin Hood; and little Betty, with a wand in her hand, represented a rose-pink and much befrilled fairy.

The next arrivals were Anne MacNab as Queen Anne, wearing her best black satin, covered with gold tinsel, a ditto cardboard crown, and a stomacher nearly as large as a soup-plate. The most successful figure of all was the graceful and beautiful Lily, representing an Indian princess. She transcended anticipation, and undoubtedly presented a striking figure in a red and gold sari, draped about her by a deft native hand; her hair was dressed native style, her arms, neck and ankles were loaded with borrowed jewels. Crawford was her counterpart—and, as it were, her consort. He looked remarkably handsome and dignified in a satin coat, neatly-folded turban, chains, belt, aigrette—all absolutely correct—for he had been dressed and admirably turned out by his notable body-servant Ahmed Khan. The Pereiras represented Darby and Joan, and the two railway boys a French Cook and a native Policeman.

As the little company circulated in the drawing-room, exclaiming at, and admiring one another, it was really a gay and festive scene. When dinner was announced Helen found herself sitting on Mr. Bennett's right hand, Mrs. Hyde on his left, Crawford, supported by Anne and Lily, faced them—poor disappointed Harvey Strong was relegated to an obscure place between Mrs. Pereira and the Policeman;

however, conversation and jokes were general. After dinner there was some music. Helen and Mrs. Hyde played and sang; also Harvey Strong, who had a nice tenor voice, and one of the railway boys produced a wonderful bass from the depths of his boots. The music was a mere preliminary and overture to the grand fire-works which presently took place from the lawn, and a series of paper balloons caused most of Chitari—who were assembled on the fringe of the premises—to fix their eyes upon the dark blue sky. When everyone's attention was absorbed heavenward Harvey Strong seized upon his opportunity, and, approaching the Parlour-maid, said :

"Will you come and take a turn with me, Miss Crawford?"

As they strolled away together he added: "I've not had a word with you the whole evening. Your dress is ripping!"

• "And so is yours!" she answered with a laugh. "I notice that a whole seam in your sleeve has come undone."

"Oh, bother my sleeve! By the way, Mary Ann, would you allow me to offer you a tip? I've got it all right in my pocket."

"That's very liberal of you," she answered, "but I only accept *English* money!"

"It's not English money, but a little gold Indian bangle," and he held it towards her. "I saw you admiring it in the Bazaar the other day, and here it is; perhaps you will accept it as a souvenir of our trip on the old *Paragon*?"

"But I don't want *any* souvenir of that trip," she answered gaily, "for I've a lump on my ankle that—

as the saying is—'I shall carry to my grave.' I'm afraid I can't accept your tip, Mr. Strong; it is very kind of you——" and she hesitated.

"It would be more kind if you were to take it; and let me tell you"—glancing about—"that it is not the only thing that I wish to offer. I—I want to offer you——"

"Oh, here she is!" exclaimed Lily's shrill voice from behind a clump of oleanders.

Strong stepped back, and Helen thrust the bangle into her apron pocket.

"Helen, Mr. Bennett has been searching the whole place for you; he wants you to come in and play 'Old Lang Syne'—most of the people are going. You see"—now turning and addressing herself to Strong—"we keep early hours here. Mr. Bennett is rather fussy, and it is past eleven o'clock, so come along, my dear English Parlour-maid," and closing her fingers on Helen's wrist with a steel-like grip she led her away to the piano, and thanks to Lily's clever manoeuvre, Helen and Harvey had no further intimate conversation—no, not a word beyond the conventional "good night."

However, two figures in native costume held a long and whispered colloquy during the bustle of departure.

"I just caught them in time," said Lily to Crawford. "He was standing close to her and had just given her something. I believe he was about to propose when I broke in!"

"That was splendid of you!" said Crawford. "I think you may leave the rest of the business to me."

The guests walked homewards *en masse*. It was

the full of the moon, a luminous eastern night; the plains and forests seemed to be infused with glory. Presently Mrs. Hyde hurried ahead with a half-asleep fairy, and the native Prince singled out the Cavalier as his companion.

"Everything went off all right, didn't it?" he remarked. "Old Bennett does you well when he goes about it."

"Yes," agreed Strong, who was not in a talkative mood. "It was a tip-top dinner, although there was no Mem Sahib!"

"I suppose you noticed that my little girl was in the place of honour?"

"And why not?" inquired Strong.

"Oh, well, I think I may tell you that it's a sign of the times."

"What times?"

"Of the day when, as Mrs. Bennett, she will always sit beside him."

"Is that so?" inquired the Cavalier, suddenly coming to a full stop.

"Yes, my dear fellow, you may take it from me that it is a fact!"

Strong walked on in stunned silence.

"As you've known us quite a good while I don't mind telling *you*," continued Crawford, "but the engagement is not given out yet, although it is an open secret! Bennett spoke to me more than a month ago, and of course I gave my consent!"

"Oh, of *course*!" assented Strong with an ironical emphasis, entirely thrown away on his companion. "Rather a disparity in age, eh?"

"Er—yes," rejoined Crawford in a doubtful tone,

almost as if the statement were open to question. "But three or four thousand rupees a month, besides private means, a fine pension, and a great position, are not to be sneezed at."

"And presumably Miss Crawford has done no sneezing! Well, I'm obliged to you for telling me, and I wish her joy. Is the marriage coming off soon?"

"Yes, within the next month or two. Ah, well, here you are!" as they halted outside the Forest Bungalow. "Good night," he said genially, "and pleasant dreams!"—this was turning the knife in the wound with a vengeance.

After the unexampled dissipation of the fancy-dress dinner and fire-works, Chitari spent a quiet day in order to recuperate its energies. The tennis-courts were not filled until late, and the Hydes and Mr. Strong were absent. As the Deputy Commissioner stood mopping his face after a severe service, he said to Helen, his partner:

"I say, what do you think?—that chap Strong has cleared out. I thought he wasn't going before Monday."

"Do you mean that he's gone away?" said Helen, aghast.

"Gone away, yes, like a fox that has broken cover! Not that there was anything crafty or foxy about young Strong. He left a P.P.C. card and a little note at my place when I was out, saying that unexpected news had hastened his departure and I was to say 'good-bye' to everyone."

If the Deputy Commissioner had not been short-sighted he might have noticed that his pretty partner

had grown a little pale, and for the rest of the match she did not play with her usual vigour. Helen was uncommonly silent and abstracted all that evening. Anne MacNab wondered if she were not well; her father and Lily wondered how she was going to take the unexpected defection of her admirer. Of this they were not long in doubt. The following afternoon Helen went over to see Mrs. Hyde to help her with sewing and lessons, also with an inflexible intention of discovering from her the true reason of her cousin's remarkably sudden disappearance. After the usual exchange of greetings, Mrs. Hyde said :

"Of course you know that Harvey has left us?"

"Yes, Mr. Bennett told us last night and distributed his farewells."

"I suppose Mr. Bennett didn't tell you anything else?"

"No, what was there to tell?"

"Oh, well, of course," she paused and then went on; "and I think, my dear Helen, that you might have confided in *me*."

"Confide what?" inquired Helen impatiently.

"Your father walked back with Harvey from the dinner-party and informed him that you were engaged to Mr. Bennett, and that the wedding was to take place very shortly."

"Oh!" exclaimed Helen, sitting erect, and an angry colour flooded her face. "How *dared* he?"

"Some people will dare anything where their own comfort is concerned," observed Mrs. Hyde, who secretly disliked Crawford and his easy-going selfishness. "I can only assure you that the news was too much for Harvey. That very night, late as

it was, he sent off to order a tonga. In spite of all I could urge and implore, he told me that he had business and really could not remain here another day."

"I suppose," said Helen after a long silence, "that there's no mistake or misunderstanding? You know father has sometimes a vague way of talking."

"At any rate," said Mrs. Hyde, "there's no mistake about Harvey's departure, or that you were the cause of it, and I think I ought to tell you that I believe he wants to marry you himself!"

Helen's pale face coloured vividly, but she made no reply.

"What shall you do *now*?" inquired Mrs. Hyde.

"I shall have a complete understanding with my father. He had no right to tell your cousin or anyone what was not true. As you know, I have not given Mr. Bennett any answer."

"And now?"

"I decided weeks ago; the answer is 'no,' and, to avoid mistakes, Mr. Bennett shall have it immediately."

"Tell me, Helen, if Harvey had not come here do you think it would have made any difference—*honestly*?"

"No, on my word of honour, it would not. The more I know of Mr. Bennett, the more I see that we could not live happily together. After all, we have little in common. He is fond of food, for one thing—I am not; I am fond of animals—he is not; he is rich and generous, but his right hand always knoweth what his left hand doeth. I know it is a hateful thing to say, but he somehow reminds me of cold boiled fish!"

"So that great matter is now settled?"

"Not quite settled," said Helen with a sudden passionate sob. "I've yet to speak to my father."

"And I've no doubt you will settle *him*!"

"Yes, and Lily too."

"Nevertheless, my dear girl, I'm afraid you will not find the MacNab bungalow a bed of roses just now; you had much better come over to me, and I will put you in the tent. Lily and your father will be up in arms, they may say things that will hurt you; and I suppose Mr. Bennett will be like the traditional bear with the sore head, and in short you have disappointed the entire community."

"All except yourself and Anne MacNab, who volunteered one day that she would *never* give her consent to my engagement to Mr. Bennett."

"I suppose she said, 'noa—noa—noa'?"

"She did. And now I shall go home and repeat this same no—no—no—to my father and to Lily!"

CHAPTER XXII

SHE SAID "NO "

THE Dufta, or office, which was an appendage of Mrs. MacNab's bungalow, was situated at a considerable distance from the main building and contained two good-sized rooms. Here John Crawford spent a good deal of his time in what was arranged as a sitting-room, with a long cane chair, an old carved, straight-backed sofa that had drifted up to Chitari from some big establishment; a large teak office table, a few bamboo chairs, and a faded Dhurri completed the furniture. It was here he wrote, smoked, and dozed; here he was visited by Lily, bringing him messages or letters, administering tea or flattery, or frequently without any excuse whatever. His daughter, on the other hand, rarely called upon him; she disliked the atmosphere of the Dufta, which was a combination of cigars, new matting, and a heavy native scent.

To-day, when she returned from her visit to Mrs. Hyde, anger winged her steps, which were directed straight to her father's quarters. With scarcely a preliminary knock, she flung open the door and entered, to find her parent reclining at his ease in the long cane chair and in enjoyment of an excellent Trichinopoly cheroot. On the sofa, her feet tucked up under her in the plastic native fashion, reposed Lily, who was smoking a cigarette; evidently the pair

were talking hard, and Helen had interrupted an important conversation. The first thing she did was to look round for a seat, for she felt so angry, and so agitated, that she was shaking all over, and realised that on the present occasion she must keep herself well in hand.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Crawford, with a wave of his cheroot. "To what am I indebted?"

"To the fact, which I believe is true, that you have announced my engagement to Mr. Bennett," rejoined Helen as she surveyed him with a white face.

"Well—and why not?" struggling to an erect position.

"Simply because it is not, nor ever will be—true!"

"Oh, nonsense—damned nonsense! You don't know what you are talking about!" he cried excitedly.

"I know very well what I am talking about, and I beg to tell you *both*"—and she glanced over at Lily—"that under no circumstances will I ever marry Mr. Bennett!"

"Then what will you do?" demanded Crawford.

To this question she made no reply.

"You can't possibly fling the man's offer in his face if you intend to remain in this little station. You can't throw away your one and only chance of making a fine match, and I say that you *shall* marry him!"

"Father! How can you speak like that? You know you have no power to force me to marry Mr. Bennett!"

"It's not I who force you, but the force of circumstances."

"But I do not intend to be bound by circum-

stances. I am young and strong, and I can make my own way."

"Bah! You talk like a sentimental schoolgirl. I thought you had more sense!"

Again Helen made no answer. Such a silence exasperated her parent, who said:

"Of course, it's that fellow Strong who has turned your head! A trumpery engineer, who just came here to spoil your chances, and then cleared off."

"Mr. Strong had nothing to do with my decision."

"Oh, hadn't he? Well, it's strange that when I informed him that you were engaged to Bennett he looked as if he had been shot and bolted the following morning. What do you call *that*?"

Lily gave a high, tittering laugh.

"There's no use in your talking to me in this way, Father." Helen spoke with passionate energy and trembling lips. "Mr. Strong does not come into the question. My mind has been made up for some time, and I shall either see or write to Mr. Bennett immediately."

"No, no, no!" protested Crawford in a loud excited voice, scrambling out of his chair as he spoke. "Don't do anything in a hurry, or anything so *mad*! My dear girl, consider what he offers you, and what we have to live on: just a hundred a year between us!"

"We can manage perfectly, thanks to Mrs. MacNab's hospitality. And Mr. Bennett will soon get over his fancy for me."

"No, not at his age; and I know what I'm talking about. Well, anyway do nothing for a week. Give yourself time to cool down, and for goodness'

sake think of *me*! Bennett and I are capital friends; he makes things pleasant here, and, I ask you, how can I go over, dine, and smoke with a fellow my daughter has turned down? What do *you* say, Lily?"

Lily, who had been listening with the closest attention, now slid off the sofa and came and knelt before Helen in a graceful native attitude.

"Oh, darling, sweetie, dearest, think how he adores you! Think of all he will *give* you—all that he will do for you and for your father. Don't be selfish: I know you love to make others happy. And it will make your father so happy if you marry Mr. Bennett; it will make all your friends so happy! Even to me—oh, it will mean so much if you are the Mem Sahib at the Residency. Promise me, darling, that you will accept Mr. Bennett!" and she clasped her hands, in an eager appeal.

"Please don't, Lily. Do get up. Nothing you can say will make any difference. I shall—I *must* refuse him!"

Lily sprang to her feet with the liveness of a panther, her appeal transformed to rage. Gripping Helen's shoulders with a furious clutch, she bent forward and, with a distorted face thrust into hers, she hissed:

"You cannot do it! You shall not do it!" And she actually shook Helen to and fro as she added: "If you did, you wicked, wicked girl, you would deserve to be *killed*!"

Helen pushed her away and said: "At any rate, it's no business of yours, Lily!"

"But it's everyone's business!" she screamed,

gesticulating with both hands. "Think of the offer : a lovely house and garden, the big pay, a motor-car, twenty servants, heaps of money—oh, my, my, my, *whatt* a chance !" Then suddenly she snatched at Helen's arm and said : "You will not be so mad as to refuse it ? No, I will not let you. I shall cling to you as if I were a forest leech, until you say 'Yes' ; and when one day you are the *Burra Mem* in Chitari you will say : 'Oh, Lily *was* a wise girl, and proved to be my best friend.' " She was about to fling herself once more upon Helen, but with unexpected dexterity she eluded her embrace, made a dash for the entrance, and hastily effected her escape.

When she reached her own room and bolted the door she was trembling all over, but her mind was firm and clear. The sooner she did something definite the better. She would put it out of the power of her father and Lily MacNab to make these scenes. She decided to write a letter to Mr. Bennett at once, and with this resolve she got out her writing-case and sat down ; but her hand shook so dreadfully, that it was some time before she could commence her task, and when she did so her writing was unusually uncertain. The note said :

"DEAR MR. BENNETT,

"I am sorry, but I think I ought to let you know without further delay that I cannot say 'Yes' to the proposal with which you have honoured me. I have thought over the matter continually, and have come to the conclusion that I am not suited to be your wife, but, if you will allow me, I will gladly remain

"Your friend, HELEN CRAWFORD."

Yes, it would do; she would not re-write it. She put the fateful answer in an envelope, addressed it, and carried it out into the veranda, whence she summoned Ahmed Khan and told him to take this note over to the Residency and give it to the Sahib's beāfer, "ek dum."

Ten minutes later Ahmed returned and said :

"I giving letter into the Commissioner's own hand. He done read it, and said, '*Salaam.*'"

Just at this moment Lily, looking rather wild and excited, dashed up the steps and drew Helen into the sitting-room. "You have not written to him, have you?" she panted breathlessly. "No, not yet? Do not say it! Do *not* say it!"

"But I have," replied Helen with restored composure. The great deed was accomplished; the question was off her mind!

"And what have you said?" demanded her father from the doorway.

"What I told you," she answered firmly. "I thanked him for the honour he had done me, and said 'No.'"

"She said '*No!*'" shrieked Lily. "Do you hear that?" And, with another piercing scream, she flung herself into an arm-chair in a fit of violent hysterics.

As Mrs. Hyde had wisely foreseen, Helen found her situation at Mrs. MacNab's anything but a bed of roses; in fact, it was intolerable. All disguise had now fallen away. Her father was sulky, and rarely opened his lips to her; when he did, it was merely to make cutting speeches. Lily was not only rude, but actually abusive; and Helen, who no longer ventured

to tennis, sat with Anne in her little den, or took refuge with Mrs. Hyde.

"Oh, it will soon blow over!" declared this lady reassuringly.

"Possibly; but meanwhile it is excessively unpleasant. Father scarcely speaks to me, and Lily is simply impossible. If you could only see the way she looks at me! And if at meals I pass her a cup, or plate, she snatches it out of my hand! I don't think I can bear it! I seem to be in everyone's black books. The Pereiras and the Manfredos stare at me with accusing eyes, and Mr. Bennett, although perfectly polite, is as a block of ice. I think I shall go away."

This announcement she repeated to Anne MacNab, always her good friend and protector.

"Anne," she said as she entered the den one evening, "I do not think that I can stand this much longer. It is not nice to be cut by everybody. You know that my father and Lily have what's called 'boycotted' me; and this afternoon, as I was walking back from Mrs. Hyde's, the Manfredos saw me coming and turned away! I dare not venture into the Residency garden; the gardeners there look at me as if I had committed some crime. Now, Anne dear, I want you to help me to get away."

"But, my dear missy, I do not *wish* you to go away."

"Oh, well, some day I shall come back, no doubt; but in the meanwhile I cannot remain in Chitari. If I do I may become like poor Lorna."

"Ah, Lorna!" exclaimed her grandmother. "Here is a letter from her. It came by this afternoon

dâk. And what do you think? She has met a young man, whom she likes very much, and, unless I am mistaken, Lorna is going to be married!"

"Oh, no; she's not in earnest!"

"I believe she is. Read this:

"The Coopers have a very nice brother here. He is in the electric works; he has a beautiful bicycle and side car, and takes me out pretty often. And, oh, I do enjoy it so. In some ways he reminds me of poor dear Charlie; but not so particular about my accent, and he *always* likes my frocks. Bertie is drawing good pay, and I think that he will make me very happy. He is a little dark, but, of course, that is no objection to *us*. Give my best love to Lily and dear, darling Helen, and tell them my news."

"Thank you," said Helen, returning the letter. "I must say that I feel a little startled. Lorna was in such terrible grief—but I hope this will be all right!"

"Oh, yes; it will be all right," rejoined her grandmother. "With girls of Lorna's temper a trouble is very, very black while it lasts—but, as you see, it is soon over, and does not leave a trace. The clouds have gone, the sun comes out."

"Well, I suppose it is a happy disposition! I hope *my* trouble will soon be over, and not leave a trace."

"I hope so, too, my dear. And now what can I do for you?"

"You can help me to a situation, if you please. You must know many ladies who have stayed at

your hotel, and among these you might find me something to do—as governess to small children.”

“Noa, noa, noa,” protested Mrs. MacNab. “Too much work, too much bother with the milkman, too much ‘dik.’ If you must go away for a time, then why not to the Palace? There you will receive good pay and have an easy life. How would you like thatt?”

“I believe it would suit me extremely well. I have always felt that I should like to meet some real Indian ladies.”

“Arl right, then. I will write to a friend who knows the Rani’s sister. They will like a lady in the Zenana who can sing and play the piano, and games, and cards, and tell stories, and do embroidery. The life is pleasant enough, and the Rani, if she fancies you, can be very nice. The Rajah, her husband, is dead; her son, the heir, is a little boy of six, and there is what is called a ‘Council of Regency.’ You would have your own room, of course, your own servants, and perhaps—but this I do not promise—the use of a motor-car. How would thatt be?”

“It all sounds most promising—too good to be true. I must confess that I should like to go, and I shall be grateful if you will write and offer my services. But please do not mention our scheme to either father or Lily until all is settled.”

Then Mrs. MacNab put up her solid arm, pulled down the girl’s face, kissed her affectionately, and said: “Arl right my dear; it shall be as you please. Your father and Lily have *their* secret, and this shall be ours!”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BHUNDARA PALACE

THE result of Mrs. MacNab's negotiations proved to be favourable; she had forwarded an excellent personal recommendation of her young lady friend, and enclosed a copy of a letter which Helen had recently received from old Lady Trevor. The Trevors were still remembered and honoured in India, and this communication—referring to the fact that they missed Miss Crawford's reading and her company so much—had an excellent effect upon the Rani of Bhundara. Accordingly she wrote, through her secretary, that she would receive Miss Crawford; also, that she would engage her at so many rupees a month to sing, read, and play games with the ladies of her Court. Miss Crawford would be guaranteed an apartment and attendance to herself, and the occasional use of a motor.

When all had been satisfactorily arranged, Mrs. MacNab broke the news to her daughter, and Helen carried out the same office with respect to her father. After the pair had recovered from the first shock of amazement, they accepted the fact of Helen's approaching departure with astounding resignation, and very soon the news was noised about the station. Helen paid her last visit to the club; she also took formal leave of the Deputy Commissioner, who bade her a stiff and ceremonious adieu, and spent a few hours with her friend Lucy Hyde.

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"You must write to me often," said the latter, "and if you don't like the Palace, always remember that you have a hearty welcome to our *tent*!"

Before her departure Helen had inquired for Mr. Strong's address—without giving her reason, and having procured this from his cousin, she packed the gold bangle very neatly, enclosed a little note, and despatched it by registered post. Harvey Strong had heard from Mrs. Hyde of the affair, which had socially shaken Chitari to its foundations. A penniless girl, who had dropped from the clouds—a mere nobody—had actually refused to become the wife of a deputy commissioner! She must be mad!

Shortly after this news had arrived the note and bangle, in reply to which he returned a long letter, about nothing in particular, and sent Helen a parcel of new books. In a postscript he added: "Perhaps some day you will accept my poor little bangle?"

At first, John Crawford, who enjoyed change, volunteered to escort his daughter to Bhundara; but this was not to be permitted: it was an undertaking for a *woman*; and Anne, having solemnly consigned her cows and poultry to the tender care of Mrs. Pereira and her own red-bearded Khansamah, accompanied Helen to her destination. It was not a long, but a tiresome and tedious journey, as a good part of it had to be performed by tonga; then came a change to a railway, and three o'clock in the afternoon saw the travellers steaming into Bhundara station. Bhundara, the capital of a native state, was not as spick and span as Jubbulpore or, shall we say, Nagpur; but at least it was ancient and picturesque, though the strong, uncompromising glare revealed a certain

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amount of dilapidation and decay. Mrs. MacNab was gratified to find that a fine motor-car from the Palace had been despatched to meet them. It was a warm afternoon, much hotter than Chitari. The sun blazed down out of a solid blue sky, and buildings threw sharp, black shadows upon the white roads as they sped along.

The Palace of Bhundara, once a fortress, was surrounded by a great wall, in which was an arched gateway, with a vast, massive door, studded with nails. In an embrasure stood a man on guard and armed; the great gate was slowly swung open and the motor rolled into an immense courtyard encompassed by buildings with high, latticed windows, and drew up at a narrow side door, where a curtain was raised and displayed a short stone staircase, ascending into the Zenana quarters. At the top of these steps an elderly woman, with much jewellery, took charge of the strangers and preceded them to yet another courtyard, with rooms opening into it on all sides, and at the farthest end a large compartment full of women, young and old, fat and thin, ugly and pretty: the relatives, satellites, and servants of the Court. Naturally, they stared with all their eyes at the English visitors. Here Anne was detained; but Helen was ushered into an inner apartment, in which she found the Rani herself, seated on a low cushion. She was a handsome, stout, rather jovial-looking woman, with long, oriental eyes, full of a sleepy fire, wearing a plain white sari, as became her widowed condition. At the moment she was engaged in playing bridge with three others. As she put her hand down and looked up, she said in English:

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"Wait; we will soon have done. Meanwhile, you can look on."

Thus commanded, Helen withdrew to a little distance and accepted the post of spectator. She observed the bridge quartette with the keenest interest, noticed their feverish desire to win, their anxious competition, their expressions of joy and despair. Apparently they played well and dealt out the cards with practised confidence. In the middle of Hindi talk it sounded odd to hear the English words, "double" and "little slam." Two of the players were handsome, dark young women, with kohl-blackened eyes and much-powdered complexions. They wore golden embroidered saris and some splendid jewellery—bangles, ear-rings, and hair ornaments. The little old lady who was partner to the Rani, was also in widow's garb; she was unusually undersized—her hands resembled those of a child—but her air and soft, drawling voice intimated that she was someone of consideration. The Rani herself played with a certain recklessness and suppressed excitement; she was remarkably quick, and never hesitated a second as to what card she should play. She had exquisite hands; her profile was almost perfect, but a tendency to a double chin somewhat marred her good looks. The reception-room was large, but did not show much sign of oriental splendour. The floor was covered with white cotton or calico; on this were spread a few silk Persian rugs; there were low divans around the walls; one or two immense mirrors; and from the centre of the ceiling hung a superb cut-glass chandelier, whose home had undoubtedly been France. In one corner stood a fine gramophone and

a veena (a native instrument); there were two or three low coffee tables, one of which supported a gold-mounted huka. The four ladies sat on low cushions, with their feet tucked underneath them, native style. Between them was the card-table, on which were silver ash-trays, sweets, and a good deal of money. By the time Helen had thoroughly inspected her surroundings the bridge had come to an end. The rubber was won by the Begum and the little old woman, her partner. The former beckoned to Helen with a peremptory gesture, and her eyes were piercingly observant as she said:

"How do you do, miss? You play bridge, of course?"

"Yes; but not well, Your Highness."

"Oh, then we will teach. And so you sing, and read, and play piano—is it not so?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"And not married? What they call 'a spin.'?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

The Rani considered her in silence for some little time. Then she struck a match, lit a cigarette, and said: "I like your face, yes—and your hat. I think you will do. The old MacNab has spoken for you, and I expect we will get on."

"I hope so," murmured Helen faintly; she felt rather daunted by the Rani's imperious dark eyes.

"You will have your meals alone. And be ready to come to me when you are called. If you know any new games, or needlework, some of my ladies will be glad to learn."

Helen made no reply, but bowed her head in assent.

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"This is my great-aunt," she said, waving her hand towards the little woman, her late partner. "The others are my cousins, the Princesses Sitara and Zuffora." Hearing their names mentioned, both smiled at Helen, and showed their white teeth. They were a handsome, buxom couple, in the early twenties. "You see, I speak English well," continued the Rani. "My father was a great person for education and what he called 'improving the condition of women,' and giving us something better to do than smoke and fiddle with wool-work and eat sweets. So I had a good governess until I was twelve years old. She taught me also to play and sing, and a little French, and gave me a taste for reading. Some English things I do like—your clothes and your story-books; but your dancing and your food—no! Now, I expect you are tired, so better go to your room: my friend will show you," and she waved a graceful dismissal.

At this moment a tall, dark, hawk-eyed woman advanced, surveyed Helen with a pair of black eyes which had the effect of having no white, and conducted her in silence from the apartment. Immediately outside the door Helen found Anne awaiting her, and two or three native women, who, being of lesser degree than the tall lady, now accompanied her along a maze of passages, all covered with white calico, up to a large room overlooking a shady garden. Evidently this enclosure was of great extent, full of orange trees, bamboos, date-palms, and immense bushes of jasmine and oleanders. She noticed here and there a white marble summer-house rising among the dark

foliage, and caught sight of numerous figures flitting hither and thither. Her sitting-room was plain, but comfortable; she found an arm-chair, a writing-table, a couch, and a vast looking-glass. Presently an attendant entered, bearing a tray on which was displayed tea, cakes, and sweetmeats. To Helen, who had been longing for some tea, the Palace decoction proved a painful disappointment. It was of a pale lavender colour, flavoured with sticks of cinnamon, and, unlike any beverage she had ever seen or tasted. She looked at Anne, and Anne looked at her, and said :

"It will be arl right, missy. I will speak to Mallo, my old friend, and she will see that you have Europe food, and Europe tea. The Kakobs and curry, and pilau will be so good, also the coffee; but I would not advise the bread, or the sweets."

If the sweets resembled the cakes Helen was determined to accept her friend's advice. These had a curious, unfamiliar, not to say sickly, flavour, and the newly arrived "companion" made but a scanty meal. She was not entirely at ease, and very sensible of the fact that she herself was now in the shadow behind the Purdah.

"I will have a good talk with my friend, and you will soon see a difference. These people are not used to English ladies, or they have forgotten. Her Highness had an English lady here some time ago, but they did not agree. By arl accounts, she left in a great hurry: it is said that there were slaps!"

Helen coloured vividly. If the Rani were to raise a hand to her, nothing would induce her to remain.

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She would follow the example of the other lady, and also depart "in a great hurry."

"I think you will be arl right," said Anne encouragingly. "You are young and good-tempered, and will not stand on what is called your dignitee. I think you will settle and be happy here for a time. Now I go to my cousin; her husband is on the railway; she lives just outside the Palace; and so, my dear missy, I shall not see you until you come back to Chitari, but you will write to me, dearie, and I will write to you, though writing, as you know, I do not like. And when there is a basket for the Palace I will put in some eggs and mangoes for yourself," and having made this kind promise she took Helen into her ample embrace and kissed her with affection. Then she added in a whisper: "Do not forget to say 'Highness,' and salaam. Do not quarrel with the tall, dark woman, who is the Rani's right hand. Do not make any remark about what you see or hear, a palace is a terrible place for tale-bearing and mischief-making. See arl, and say nothing—and that to you, is my last word."

CHAPTER XXIV

STRANGE SURROUNDINGS

HELEN CRAWFORD was an adaptable girl, and within a couple of weeks had become accustomed to her surroundings, to the tittering and whispering, the pungent smell of unfamiliar herbs, perfumes, and huka smoke; to the silent footfalls, the constant jingling of anklets; and she had also accustomed herself to the meal-times and hours. Curiosity respecting her had subsided somewhat, and of the one hundred women inmates she now knew a few by name and a good many by sight. The two young princesses who had played bridge the day she arrived, Zuffora and Sitara, were members of the house; as both wore jewels and gorgeous saris, undoubtedly their husbands still survived. One of these (Sitara) made friends with the stranger, walked with her arm in arm round the garden, and in broken, but confidential, English told her something of the other residents.

"There is the Rani Sona, who, as you see, is very beautiful and clever. She has had what you call ed-u-ca-tion. Then there is also the little old woman—the Bibi Rani, her aunt. Oh, she is so good, but she has had a time! Her son, the Rajah of the nearest native state, is a dreadful man—a Budmash! He takes opium; he spends—even the English Resident cannot control him—and he was so cruel to his mother that she has come here for refuge. She could do

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nothing with him; he would not give her money, so how could she live? He said he wished she was dead. Oh, he is a bad man! Then there is that tall, dark woman, Ayesha, the Rani's sister-in-law. Do not offend her; she likes not the English. Her husband, Turab Ali, is the little Rajah's guardian, and she has ever the ear of the Rani Sona."

"And all these many women, coming and going?" (There were girls playing tennis or Badminton, others looking on; children with ayahs; older women, sitting together drinking sherbet, syrup, or coffee, discussing the palace politics with much animation.)

"They are relations," explained Sitara; "aunts and cousins, and their servants. That very pretty young girl you see playing tennis was married last year to the Rani's uncle, Shumshu Din, an old, old man. She and her grandmother, and mother, and sisters all live here."

Helen paused and looked on. It was a gay scene, with the bright-coloured saris; the graceful, flitting figures; the wonderful vegetation: bamboos, jasmine, orange, and great tropical trees. It recalled a gathering at a garden party at home, with the men eliminated. There was no band, but someone in a white marble summer-house was singing a native song in a sweet, young voice, and accompanying herself on the zeena.

"Here comes the Rani!" said Sitara, rising hastily. "I expect she wants a game of tennis with me."

This proved to be the case. Though rather stout, Her Highness played well and vigorously, while a

crowd collected round and applauded, and cried, "Shabash! Shabash!" whenever she made a good stroke. She and her partner won; the question was, Was she allowed to win? Her son, the Rajah, a waxen-faced, delicate looking little fellow of five, looked on with great interest. His two sisters were older than himself—black-eyed, boisterous little girls—but naturally the Rajah was the pivot of the whole court and the apple of his mother's eye.

After the set was over, a little out of breath, she led him by the hand to a white marble seat, surrounded by great bushes of jasmine, took him on her knee, and regaled him and herself with oranges—beautiful loose-skinned Nagpur oranges, which grew in the gardens in abundance. Presently she beckoned to Helen, who approached and, as in duty bound, salaamed.

"You may sit down," she said. "This is my little son. What do you think of him?"

"I think he is very pretty," Helen replied, as he turned and stared at her with jet-black, haughty eyes.

"The Rajah, my husband, was a handsome man. He died four years ago. Oh, he was so happy when this boy was born, for then the succession was safe. Of course, His Highness the Rajah had other wives and children—but they were different."

Helen looked at her interrogatively; she did not venture to put the question, "Are they all here?"

"Oh, of course, they live here," said the Rani, interpreting her glance. "The palace is very large, as you see," waving her hand. "Each family has its own apartments, and we are all good friends. Do you see that young woman over there, with the dyed

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hair, playing Badminton? She was one of my husband's wives. She is, oh, so clever; she is half Cashmeri, and can tell fortunes. He was very fond of her, and so am I. My husband had four wives; of course, of these I was the first. But now there is the Mozzlin; it is the hour for prayer, and I am going in. To-night you must come and play bridge and the piano, and I will practise some of my new songs."

The Rani enjoyed the sound of her own voice; she sang English and Italian songs in a high and piercing soprano, much to the satisfaction of herself and her audience. The evenings were invariably the same: music, coffee, bridge: the company was generally the same: the two princesses, the little old Bibi, the tall, arrogant Ayesha, and occasionally one or two bejewelled, handsome young women, no doubt the wives of the Rajah's relations. Helen played bridge for hours, for the Rani was tireless, and could not endure to lose.

Some weeks had passed, and everything had gone smoothly so far. In the morning Helen gave several of the ladies lessons in embroidery; she taught the old Bibi "Patience," practised the accompaniments of the Rani's songs, and during the heat of the day retired to her own apartment to sew, or read, while the palace slept. She had seldom encountered a man in the Zenana except the tall, bearded individual, Turab Ali, Guardian of the Rajah, and the little wizened Shunshum Wiii, a sort of Grand Vizier, with a tight white turban, a long black velvet coat, girded with a gold belt, and a buckle of enormous rubies. This was the husband of the charming young girl, the beauty of the palace. When these lords of crea-

tion entered, most of the women veiled their faces or turned to the wall. Their presence was ignored, and these visits were never prolonged.

Once or twice the Rajah's guardian spoke to Helen in sonorous Hindi, and she replied, as, thanks to Anne and Lily, and now a palace Monshi, she could converse fairly well. Turab Ali had a pair of black, tyrannising, interrogative eyes, and Helen felt that he surveyed her with veiled hostility, although his remarks were ever suave and polite.

CHAPTER XXV

THE BELATI BIBI

HELEN had been nearly three weeks at Bhundara, when she received a command to accompany the Rani on a motor drive. A magnificent limousine, with gilt equipments, and two gorgeous servants awaited them in the inner court, and into this the Rani, heavily veiled, was conducted with much ceremony, and Helen was accorded a seat. They glided smoothly through the outer entrance, past numbers of flat-roofed houses and not a few crowded, squalid streets. At last they reached the open country, travelling at a tremendous pace. The country through which they flew seemed to be well cultivated; there were heavy crops of grain, rice crops, and tobacco gardens; villages embosomed in trees, with large tanks about them; it was a land of wells and gardens, of rich soil, of the reedy Jheel and the milk-white heron; and the many laden bullock carts encountered on the roads gave the impression of business-like prosperity. By and by the Rani, who had removed her veil, asked Helen to put down the windows—the car, of course, had been closed. As she stretched forward to do this the Rani noticed her gold bangle and said :

“Oh, what a nice bracelet! Let me look! For me, alas!” she said when she examined it, “there are no jewels now.”

"No," replied Helen; "I believe in India widows give up all dress and ornament."

"I wish it were not so," said the Rani. "I do love precious stones, and we have some wonderful fine ornaments in our Tosha Khana. The little Rajah and his sisters wear them on grand occasions."

"Then I shall hope to see them," said Helen. "I do like looking at beautiful things."

"The jewels of an old Begum, a relation, were far superior to ours; she had hordes and hordes: quantities that had come to her from many quarters—some said *loot*. She had pearls the size of pigeons' eggs, emeralds as big as the palm of my hand, wonders and marvels, nothing like them in India, except perhaps those to be found at the Court of Hyderabad; and the awful thing is that these wonderful jewels, and lakhs, and chores of gold mohairs, and gold and silver elephant trappings, and jewelled saddles and swords, have disappeared. No one can even guess what has become of them. The Begum was rather silly in her old age; she married an Englishman of the name of Crawford. By the way"—suddenly turning to look at Helen with her great black eyes—"your name is Crawford. Are you any relation?"

"Yes; I believe this John Crawford who married a Begum was my father's grand-uncle."

"Oh, this is funny!"

"He was by all accounts a very rich man," continued Helen. "Entirely independent of the Begum's fortune, and we have always wondered what became of his property."

"I suppose it disappeared, the same as the jewels."

"But not altogether," corrected Helen. "We have

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been given to understand that his fortune was in *land*. My father is his heir, and if we could recover even a half of it, it would be a great matter, for we are *very* poor."

"I expect the British Government has grabbed the land; but whoever has the jewels, that is another affair. I wish we could trace them, for, after all, they would be *our* property. How much I would like to see my little son with the Begum's big pearls round his throat!"

"Perhaps you may yet!" said Helen, more by way of making conversation than that she believed in such a possibility.

"It is odd, is it not, that your great grand-uncle should be the husband of the Rajah's great grand-aunt; it almost sounds as if we were related," and she burst into a peal of laughter. "Your father is in this country, is he?"

"Yes, Your Highness; he is at Chitari."

"And what is his business?"

"He has no actual business at present. He came out six months ago to look for his uncle's property, but of this, up to the present, he can find no trace."

"And he is staying with the old MacNab all the time? The old MacNab has one handsome daughter—is it not so?"

"Yes, Your Highness; Lily MacNab is almost beautiful. But how did you know about her?"

"We in the Zenana often know more than those who are living outside. I can tell you more than that," she pursued. "Anyway we have heard that the Deputy Commissioner at Chitari, who is not very young, but is rich, wanted to marry Miss Crawford."

Helen gave a little start.

"But that Miss Crawford said 'No,' and to get away from her difficulties applied for a post at my Court. Now, is not that true?" And she leant over, placed a hand on Helen's knee, and gazed into her face with her great black eyes.

Helen's silence and deep blush gave an immediate assent.

"It is partly true—but I cannot think how you know."

"Nothing more easy," rejoined the Rani. "My women in the palace have an ear in the Chitari bazaar and in many other bazaars; their friends bring news; there are such things as letters; and the families of nobles, who live in the cities, are full of gossip and information, which they pass on to us, and we do the same kind office for them. You English people would be truly astonished if you had any idea how much we natives of the country are behind the scenes! I knew all about your father's foolish journey long before I ever saw you."

"A foolish journey indeed," agreed Helen. "It can come to nothing, and yet, in one way, I am glad we made it, as it brought me out to India."

"Then you like India?"

"Immensely."

"But you have seen nothing of it. After all, what is Chitari? A little jungle station. And here, in my palace, you are a sort of prisoner. To-day is the first time you have been beyond its walls."

"Yes, what you say is true, but I have seen more than you think: Bombay and its beautiful harbour; the great Ghâts; all the country between this and

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them; I have learnt to know something of the native people and their ways; I have picked up a good deal of the language; and even at Chitari I've seen something of real India: old forts and tombs, buried in the forests; and have heard many histories from Mr. Bennett. Now and then he took Lily MacNab and me for many miles into the province, and we saw quaint old towns, the great Nerbudda river, and lots of other things."

"I see you are an enthusiast, and as you enjoy sight-seeing I will take you for a drive very often."

"Thank you so much, Your Highness."

"We have come now about fifty miles, and it is time to return. Ayesha will be watching the clock. When she heard that you were related to old Crawford, the Begum's husband, she was determined that I should not send for you. She said you would bring us bad luck. But, of course, that is nonsense; you have brought us a lot of new ideas and quite a little whiff of amusement from the outer world. Ayesha is a strange woman—oh, very strong, and very clever. She holds the keys of the Tosha Khana, our storeroom and jewel-house. Some day I shall get her to bring up the state jewels for you to see; also I like looking at them myself!"

During the return journey the Rani put many questions to her companion—oh, such childish, insignificant questions as a rule, although some were sufficiently probing and shrewd. She asked her her age, her father's age, the amount of his income, his employment in London, if they kept a servant and what wages they paid her; how much her dresses cost; if she had any young men friends—to all of

which Helen gave more or less truthful replies, the last being delivered as they glided through the palace gates.

That same evening, not long after Helen had finished her supper, there came a tap at her door, and immediately afterwards a tall woman, in native dress, entered the room.

"I thought I should like to come and see you, and how you are getting on," she said in perfect English as she advanced. No; it was not an acquired language, but the real home article. The corners of the room were somewhat dim; but now, when the stranger came within the full glare of the electricity, Helen realised that here was one of her own countrywomen, wearing native dress—tall, fair, remarkably good-looking, wearing magnificent diamond earrings and a conciliatory smile. She stood motionless, looking down on Helen, who was too astonished to utter a word.

"You are amazed, I see. I am not surprised at that." As the woman spoke, she took a seat and crossed her knees, and Helen noticed that although she wore a heavy gold embroidered white sari, underneath was a silk petticoat of European fashion, and her shapely legs and feet were encased in silk stockings and smart high-heeled shoes.

"So you are European?" said Helen at last.

"English! Yes; I am one of the palace ladies. You have not heard of me, have you?"

Helen merely shook her head.

"The Rani Sona and I are good friends—apart. We rarely meet and never speak of one another. I've my own apartments, my own resources."

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"But—excuse me for asking—*how* do you come to be here?"

"I happen to be here as one of the wives—or rather, widows—of the late Rajah."

"Oh!" exclaimed Helen.

"Yes; I see you are shocked!"

"How—how could you?" stammered the girl.
"A native!"

"A native gentleman!" she corrected. "Better born than myself. As to how I *could*? The matter was only too easy. I exchanged a life of poverty, misery, loneliness, and hard work, for absolute idleness, kindness, and comfort. I am thoroughly satisfied."

"I wonder——" began Helen, and then she paused.

"Wonder no longer. I'll explain. In the first place, let me tell you that my name is Flora—the 'Belati' Flora, or Bibi Flora. I have neither home nor belongings in England. I was an only child: my father a very poor parson. He and I ran the parish between us, my mother being dead. I taught in Sunday school; I played the harmonium; I visited the poor, being myself as poor as any, for what is one hundred and twenty pounds a year to a man who has to keep up a respectable appearance and pay servant's wages, butcher, baker, and doctor? There were no wealthy people in the parish to lend a hand, and I firmly believe the struggle killed my father. When he died I was almost penniless. The sale of the furniture and his books paid off our small debts, and then a distant connection of my mother, who was my god-

mother, knowing of my circumstances, invited me to London and found me a post as nursery governess to two small Anglo-Indian children. My godmother was not well off herself; she had a large family, but she did what she could for me, and helped me with my meagre outfit. I remember her saying, 'Flora, a girl with your looks should do well for herself in India; I don't think you will be long an under-paid nursery governess.'

"And how did you find your situation?" inquired Helen as her visitor paused to light a cigarette.

"*Awful!* All the woman's promises were so much piecrust. She promised my godmother that I should be one of the family. I was as much one of the family as her ayah. I never took my meals with Colonel and Mrs. Dobson; I never met any of their guests; I had the children on my hands—an ill-tempered, peevish, spoiled couple—from morning to night. My only time of rest was when they were asleep, and then I generally had sewing to do. I was utterly miserable: my future seemed so hopeless, and I was bound to this woman's service for two years. I had no friends: not a soul to speak to. When Mrs. Dobson was not entertaining she was always out. One day, when walking with the children in the public gardens in Poonah, the Rajah of Bhundara, who had come to the races, saw and noticed me. I believe he had me followed home, and that evening he sent me a letter, asking me to meet him, and, if I wished, to bring a friend with me. I had no friend to bring, so I went alone. I was reckless, and felt that if I stayed on with Mrs. Dobson I must either commit suicide or go mad! I found him a handsome, cour-

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teous gentleman, who spoke English fluently. He told me that he had observed and admired me for some time, and after one or two interviews I agreed to become his secondary wife. I have never regretted this—no, not once. His Highness was very kind to me—indeed, more than kind, for until the little Rajah was born I was his favourite. He had been to Europe; he was well educated and well read, so we had something in common. I sang to him also, and he liked my voice; it is a contralto, quite different from the Rani's macaw scream," and she laughed derisively.

"But have you no longing for your own country and your own people?"

"No, indeed. What could my country offer me if I were to return there? Here I have ease, leisure, luxury—not a care in the world. I have everything I require: papers, all the books of the day, a piano, a motor-car, several well-trained attendants, my plants, and birds, and dog."

"All the same," said Helen, "I do not understand how you can be satisfied, just living like a silkworm in a cocoon."

"I am a very comfortable silkworm, thank you. The Rani Sona and I are friends. I like the little old Bibi and Sitara and Zuffora, and quite a number of other women; but Ayesha—*no!* That woman is a snake, whom I distrust. However, I do not come in her way; I keep to myself."

"Shall you ever leave the palace, do you think?"

"No; why should I? You see, I have all I want here. A good pension has been settled on me, and

when I am old I cannot be turned out: they must keep me. Tell me, how long is it since you left England?"

"More than six months."

"And why did you come here?"

"The palace could answer that question; they seem to know all my affairs. But I may tell you that I wanted to earn money and be independent."

"The money is good," said Bibi Flora; "but there are drawbacks, of course; there's always a fly in the ointment. The Rani has a temper, and is as changeable as the wind: loves you to-day, hates you to-morrow. However, if you can read aloud and play bridge, and tell her amusing stories, you will be a fixture here for some time. Now I must be going. It has been very nice to come and talk to one of my own countrywomen, to hear the English tongue, and look at an English face. Yet never do I wish to return. Oh, when I think of those cold, bitter winters, in my thin, broken boots, tramping through the slushy lanes; our miserable fires; our wretched food; the cold, vault-like rectory, on which the sun never shone—here it is all sun, and the land of sun! You have not talked much," she added; "but, of course, I have taken your breath away: you are shocked, I see. But I do not think, if he were to know the facts, that my dear old father would be shocked. After all, my position is entirely in accordance with the Old Testament—even the wise Solomon had more wives than he could count. I hope you and I will see a good deal of one another."

"Thank you, I *hope* so; but, you see, my time is not my own."

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"Nothing is your own here—not even your life! But no; I do not wish to frighten you. I believe the days of tragedies are over. There is to be a sort of native party the day after to-morrow; you will not be expected to be present. The ladies of a noble house in the city are coming to gossip, and feast. This will be an opportunity for you to carouse with me! I shall send a servant to fetch you at eight o'clock. I want to introduce you to my quarters and my own birds and dog."

Helen spent a delightful evening in the apartments of Flora; they were certainly the last word in comfort and luxury. The couches and armchairs were European; there were birds, plants, and a Pekinese dog. Altogether it was difficult for Helen to realise that they were in the private apartments of a native palace, for little as the occupant desired to revisit England, her surroundings were as English as they could possibly be. Flora had a delightful contralto voice, and Helen was not surprised at the late Rajah's preference for her singing to that of his première wife. Helen accompanied her, and she sang song after song with untiring good nature.

"Yes; I have a voice. I led the choir and trained it," said Flora. "It is such a treat—and a treat I've not known for years—to have a good accompanist. I shall be very selfish, and worry you to come here as often as possible."

"You may be sure I shall come when I can," said Helen. "But have you no visitors—no friends?"

"Yes, some of the other palace ladies come to see

me and drink coffee, and gossip; but as to *friends*—they are not to be had, I mean human friends. My birds, my dog, are all I want. I am a queer creature, am I not? You have never heard of, or seen, anyone like me, I'm sure. Now, I'm afraid I must let you go," and she conducted Helen to the door and kissed her.

CHAPTER XXVI

DISMISSED IN DISGRACE

THE promised exhibition of the Bhudara jewels actually took place. Ayesha, accompanied by several laden women, appeared in the principal sitting-room; a large square of red velvet was laid on the floor; the gems were removed from their cases with almost religious care. They made indeed a goodly show, and at least fifty women assembled round the centre of attraction, devouring the ornaments with greedy eyes. These were handled by the Rani herself—one by one she took them up, held them in a good light, and related their several histories and approximate value.

One of the principal objects was a magnificent necklace, or "Kantha," composed of splendid rubies and pearls, united by fine gold wire—the rubies with fire in their hearts. This ornament was historical, and had been taken from an enemy chief by a Rajah of Bhundma on the field of battle. The legend said that the dead man's blood still ran in these wonderful stones. Then there was a necklace of diamonds and emeralds—the latter flat and uncut, but of immense size and wonderful colour. Next was a necklace of emeralds and rubies, finished with long pearl tassels. A sirpesh, or forehead-ornament, excited a murmur of admiration as it was held up; it consisted of great plaques of gold, set with large diamonds and emerald

drops. A plume for a turban displayed seven strings of emeralds and a half sphere set in diamonds. Another plume displayed twelve strings of large pearls. There were armlets, or bazubunds, ornamented with large emeralds of rich colour, covered by an engraved pattern. Besides these were ropes of glorious pearls; jade boxes inset with jewels; gold bangles and anklets, encrusted with diamonds; anklets, rings and earrings by the dozen, and some enormous rubies set in an armlet which an inscription upon it declared to have belonged to Amir Shah, the last native conqueror of India.

The exhibition lasted a considerable time and was watched with palpitating interest. Helen noticed that the Rani looked upon the jewels with gloating and longing eyes, and as they were severally returned to their cases, and the cases wrapped up in white cotton, she gave an audible sigh. Helen said to herself: "What thousands, and thousands, and thousands were sunk in these wonderful precious stones, and if these were as nothing in comparison with those of the old Begum, what must *her* treasure be? Aladdin's find in the cave would be the nearest approach to it!"

The Rani proved to be as good as her word and invited Helen to accompany her on various long motor drives, and conversed and questioned unceasingly. Once she spoke of Flora Bibi, and said:

"I know the white woman has been to see you. I think she is crazy, but quite harmless. Five years ago she was very beautiful and very miserable, and the Rajah took pity on her—he had a kind heart. I

dare say it is a pleasure to her to see another English woman. Oh, how I should *hate* to be the one native lady among a hundred female Europeans! I could not bear it—I should kill myself!”

“It is a curious situation, certainly,” admitted Helen.

“You could not endure it, could you?”

“No, Your Highness; but I must say the Bibi Flora seems very contented and happy.”

“Yes, that is because she is an idiot!” replied the Rani with sonorous emphasis.

Helen looked out of the window of the car upon the flying country, and said to herself: “I believe she is as sane as I am—but a strange woman and a materialist.”

To return to Chitari: Helen had kept up a correspondence with her father, Anne and Lily; everything seemed to be going on as usual. John Crawford had finished his book and sent it to be typewritten; this was the only intelligence of any importance, beyond the fact that Anne had had a wonderful crop of gram and the English cow had given birth to a heifer calf—a matter of supreme congratulation. There came from Nagpur the announcement of her grand-daughter’s engagement to Bertie Cooper, of the Telegraph. Lorna begged her dear Aunt Lily to go down to Nagpur, make the acquaintance of her darling Bertie, and help with her trousseau.

“I would come to Chitari myself,” Lorna went on to say, “but Bertie cannot get leave, and I can’t bear to be parted from him. Who knows what might

happen while I was away—he might catch cholera and die; so dear, darling, sweetie Lily, pack up your things and come down to the cousins; they are longing to see you, and the change will do you good.”

And so Lily, who loved weddings and finery, stood not upon the order of her going, but departed without delay.

John Crawford missed, not only daily but hourly, his companion, his consoler. Her mother was too much engrossed with the cultivation of her farm, and the condition of her cattle, to spare much time to her paying guest. Matters were still *en délicatesse* between the Deputy Commissioner and himself, although they smoked and played tennis together, and Mr. Bennett politely and forgivingly inquired for news of Miss Crawford. Then the Hydes and he had never much in common, and there had been a distinct coolness since he had told their cousin, Harvey Strong, a bold and flatfooted lie. The consequence of all this was that poor John Crawford found himself somewhat at a loose end. He wrote a little, shot a little, and spent a good deal of his idle time conversing with his English-speaking bearer, the insidious Ahmed Khan. Ahmed Khan had friends in Bhundara. He felt an irresistible desire to go and see them; he was tired of Chitari, and monotony; he longed to gamble and gossip, and he proceeded with much cleverness and eloquence to work upon the imagination of his master. He told him true tales of the riches of the house of Bhundara, of its marvellous jewels, how the chances were that the Crawford treasure had been carried off and secretly stored by them.

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"If I were your honour," he said, "I would write to the Council of Regency, ask for information, and make a *claim*. If the wonderful pearls and rubies belonging to the old Begum are anywhere they are in the Tosha Khana of the Rajah of Bhundara, of a truth! Protector of the Poor, I would write a letter, and then I would go down and stay in the city. There is a good dâk bungalow near the station, and of course your honour would like to see the Miss Sahib?"

John Crawford, chameleon-like, received the suggestion with enthusiasm. Like Ahmed Khan, he too would like a change, and by a most unlucky coincidence the next day's dâk brought him a letter from Helen, half-filled with a description of the Bhundara family jewels. Such ropes of pearls, such fiery rubies, such blazing diamonds—surely they could not be equalled in any court of India. This letter, so to speak, fired the mine! When Helen had related old Sir Hercules Trevor's tales, she had roused her father's dormant craze respecting India; on the present occasion her letter had inflamed his mind with a desire to investigate the matter of the Bhundara jewels without further loss of time.

First of all, he wrote a letter—on the very best paper procurable in the bazaar—and addressed it to the Council of Regency, Bhundara, stating that he was the legal heir and descendant of the well-known John Crawford, that he had reason to suppose that some of his uncle's possessions had come into the hands of the Bhundara family, that he would be obliged if they would give him some information on the matter, and if what he believed to be true was

supported by facts he was prepared to accept a half share of the jewels!

When this missive came to the hand of Turab Ali he read it and handed it over to the old Vizier, and said with a grim smile:

"The man is a lunatic! He asks for half the state jewels! There is no answer."

In writing to Helen her father made no allusion to this letter, and she was in entire ignorance of the application, although half the palace was humming like a hive, and laughing immoderately at such folly.

Having received no reply for ten whole days, urged and goaded by Ahmed, John Crawford left Chitari by tonga, accompanied by his bearer, and in due time turned up at the Bhundara Dâk bungalow.

Immediately after his arrival he sent a note to his daughter at the Palace, and she, accompanied by two liveried servants, motored over to visit him that evening. After a little talk and admiration of the car and its appointments, and description of the boredom of Chitari, he unfolded his plans.

"I have reason to believe that the great treasure is in, or about, this city. Ahmed Khan tells me that such is the common talk of all the old people in the bazaar, and so I have come down on purpose to interview the Council of Regency and to go into the matter thoroughly. I will accept half the jewels, and no questions asked. I cannot say fairer than that!"

Helen stared at her father in horrified silence. Sometimes his ideas were so foolish that she began to fear that his brain was weakening. The idea of her parent coming boldly into the city and demanding half of the state jewels on the mere strength of a

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bazaar "shave"! Such folly was absolutely incredible. But Helen did not know of the long, persistent, eloquent exhortations of Ahmed Khan, nor with what detail and assurance he had laid the facts before his impressionable master, who was always only too ready to meet a will o' the wisp halfway!

"Father," said Helen at last, "I never heard of such a wild expedition. The jewels here have been in the family for centuries. This can be proved—not one single pearl or ruby belonging to the old Begum is among them. It is my opinion that they were buried in the earth years and years ago and will never be heard of again."

"That is so *like* you, Helen! Always throwing cold water on my best schemes. What more probable than that the old woman sent her relations her jewels to keep in a safe place? As for burying them in the earth, I am sure she was not such a fool. Anyhow, I have asked for an audience in the palace for to-morrow afternoon."

"I do not think they will receive you, Father."

"Why should they not receive me?" striking his cane upon the ground.

"After all," she returned, "why should they?"

"Well, I'm your father; you are in the employment of the Rani—a lady of the Court."

"I do not think that they will consider that a claim, and Turab Ali, who is the Principal of the Regency Council, is a stern man. If I were you I would not have any argument or quarrel with him. Especially as I am absolutely sure that none of the jewels you are in search of are in Bhundara." But Helen might as well have talked to the dāk

bungalow table—her arguments and pleadings were a mere waste of breath.

John Crawford remained at the dâk bungalow for a whole week, more or less restless and uncomfortable. The food was by no means up to the mark—dâk bungalow tea and poultry have a world-wide notoriety. He missed Anne MacNab's tempting meals and incomparable cleanliness. During the heat of the day he dozed; in the evening he went forth and inspected the narrow bazaar, or, instigated by Ahmed, prowled round the precincts of the palace.

He wrote several letters to the Regency, which were not answered, and received "chits" from his daughter, but he was no nearer obtaining his wish than the hour when he arrived. In short, with regard to the palace, it was always a case of "Durwaza bund."

At last he became desperate and, egged on by Ahmed, actually made a raid upon the fortress. He managed to pass unnoticed through the outer gate, for it was the hour of noon, a well-chosen time, as most of the retinue were at their midday meal; he had actually reached the second court, and the entrance to the Zenana, when he was discovered, set upon by half a dozen men, and very severely handled: his clothes were torn, his collar was dragged off, his topi was missing, the cane in his hand was broken. In this pitiable condition he was conveyed into an inner room, and there confronted by members of the Regency. His daughter was sent for in haste, and was appalled when she beheld her father, tattered and torn, covered with dust, truly an abject spectacle, robbed of every trace of human dignity. What a

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contrast to the native gentlemen, in their spotless turbans and embroidered silk coats, looking so imposing and austere !

"This is your father?" Turab Ali said, pointing to Crawford and surveying Helen with a pair of piercing and tyrannical eyes. "He is a dangerous madman, he has been trying to break into the palace. He must be got out of this place without delay—otherwise we shall hand him over to the police and put him in prison. However, in consideration for you, we show mercy. It is for you to convey him back to Chitari without delay. We shall not expect you to return. For as far as we can see," he added with a bitter smile, "your parent will require *all* your attention !"

And thus, humiliated and abased, Helen was dismissed from the Court of Bhundara.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BAMBOO STICK

THE incursion of John Crawford naturally caused extraordinary excitement in the palace, and dozens of dark eyes were peeping through the marble lattice when he was led away, escorted by six men. His topi had been found and restored, but he walked with a limp, his coat was in rags, and he was undoubtedly developing a black eye. It was arranged that he was to remain in the dâk bungalow all night with a strong guard, and that he and his daughter were to return to Chitari the following morning by the first train.

Helen was overwhelmed by such humiliating and unexpected disaster; she really began to fear that her father was losing his reason. To think of his *daring* to make his way into the interior court of the palace after he had been repeatedly and sternly denied an audience, and there was nothing to justify or even colour his audacious claim.

One thing afforded her a faint gleam of comfort—this experience would put an end to the crazy search for treasure.

As soon as her parent had been removed she sought the Rani, who, disturbed from her mid-day meal, raised her pretty hands in despair and said :

“Oh, my, this is a blow ! Why are you English people so mad ? Bibi Flora is mad, your father is madder, and, of course, after such an awful scandal,

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I cannot keep you in my service. Turab Ali has been talking to me, and is very angry. I do not think he would be so severe but for Ayesha; she is jealous of you. She hated my taking you for those motor drives; she cannot bear me to like anyone but herself—and so you must go.”

“Of course I must go, Your Highness. I will put all my things together at once, and we will leave Bhundara early to-morrow. I am so sorry my father has caused all this disturbance, but I really do believe that, on the subject of his uncle’s fortune, he is not *quite* sane. The search is the consuming occupation of his mind. I am most grateful to Your Highness for your kindness to me; I have spent a very happy time in the palace.”

“And you have made us all happy! What with the games you have taught, the new stitches, your music, and your bridge—oh, such a good partner, I do not know what we shall do without you. You have braced us up, and opened windows into the big world, through which we have been able to look—and without shame. I am really and truly sorry that you must leave us,” and there were tears in her handsome, dark eyes. “My little girls are so fond of you—you taught them how to skip and dance; and the little old Bibi—how she will miss you at ‘patience.’ Well, I must allow you to go and put your things together. I will send you something, which I hope you will accept as a little present from me.”

The little present proved to be a most beautiful ring: one large sapphire of a deep gentian blue, simply set in soft India gold.

Helen had many farewells to make. The most affecting of these was with Bibi Flora, who had be-

come much attached to her, visited her daily and remained sometimes for hours.

"Oh, what a trouble this is for me!" she exclaimed. "Once more I shall be alone! Before you came I did not care; now I shall care dreadfully. The talks with you have been as water to a thirsty land. What a dreadful affliction to have a father like yours! Oh, why did you bring him out to India?"

"I did not bring him out," replied Helen. "It was the last thing I should have wished to do. On the contrary, much against my will, he brought me!"

"And now you have to take him back to Chitari and never let him out of your sight! Poor girl, I do pity you! My father, thank Heaven, was different; he never did odd things; just went round his daily duties, like a horse in a mill. You will write to me, will you not, my dear?"

"Yes, of course."

"Your letters will be something to look forward to. One day you asked me—indeed, it was the first time we met—did I ever wish to leave this place? Ever 'come out,' as you expressed it? Now, perhaps, I shall! I will 'come out' to see you and be near you. I have a good pension, which cannot be withdrawn, and I might settle myself in your neighbourhood as Mrs. Smith, a widow. I feel certain that the women in the palace would be delighted to get rid of me; they would even *pay* me to go!"

"Well, I hope you really will do this some day," said Helen. "I shall be so glad to see you; but just at present I have no fixed home, and I do not know where we may live—or what my future will be. On

one point only am I quite certain, and that is—that we shall always be poor.”

She felt for once much depressed; the calamities of the immediate past and the uncertainties of the immediate future weighed upon her soul.

Helen and her father left the city early the following morning, arriving in Chitari the same afternoon. There had been no time for letter-writing, and the return of Crawford was as unexpected as it was ignominious. His body servant, Ahmed Khan, was detained in Bhundara, where he was recognised as a well-known and accomplished thief—a bulmash with a forged character. John Crawford looked strangely dejected, battered, and unlike himself as he stiffly descended from the station tonga.

“Oh, my! what is this?” cried Mrs. MacNab, hurrying forward with uplifted hands. “And oh, my dear Missy, I am so glad to see you. Your father has had an accident?” pointing to his broken topi and his bruised face, as he limped slowly up the steps.

“You shall hear all about it presently, Anne. Father is tired and thirsty; he would like a bath and to go to his own room.”

“And Ahmed—but *where* is Ahmed?” she demanded breathlessly.

“We left him behind,” explained Helen, as soon as she had paid off the tonga. “Perhaps you will allow your Michael to look after father, and if you will come into my room now I will tell you everything, and why *I* have come back.”

“Whatever bad news you are going to tell, this is good news,” and Anne seized her round the neck and kissed her repeatedly.

"I have left the palace."

"Oh, my! But why? When the Rani and all the ladies were so pleased with you and you so happy?"

"Father came down and made trouble. He asked to see the Council of Regency, and he wanted to claim half of the family jewels as his own. He forced his way into the second court of the palace yesterday, and the guards caught him and set upon him and beat him, as you see. Turab Ali and the Vizier were furious. They said it was one of two things: either father must be sent to prison and tried and punished, or I was to take him away, and bring him up here immediately, and never return."

Helen's story was listened to with uplifted hands any many questions and "Oh, my's!" and "Oh, what foolishness!"

Helen might almost have saved herself the trouble of relating the tale to Anne, for the following day it was all over the bazaar, with astounding amplifications. The man Crawford had been well beaten for his insolence and audacity; he was only fit for a "poggie khana." Undoubtedly Crawford felt his position keenly, was conscious of a bad black eye and many bruises, and, lurking in the veranda or in the garden, avoided intercourse even with the servants, and there enjoyed the luxury of self-pity. For one who was usually so serene and amiable, he was in an extraordinary bad temper; his present unhappy circumstances had soured his genial blood.

"Look at that!" he exclaimed one day, coming into the veranda, where Helen was sewing, and throwing his uncle's stick upon the table. "See what those

devils have done! They've even broken that; or, rather, I believe, *I* broke it on them! But what chance had I—six to one? The thing is done for!”

“I am not so sure,” said Helen, taking it up and examining it carefully. “With a couple of pieces of silver wire I can get it nicely mended in the bazaar; it is the only thing you have belonging to old John, and it is a fine, strong piece of bamboo.” As she continued examining it more closely she took a hairpin out of her hair and poked up a crevice. “Father!” she exclaimed, “I do believe there is something *inside* the stick; anyway, it is not hollow!”

“The chances are it is full of white ants,” he answered irritably; “that or dry-rot. Here, give it to me!” He shook it roughly, banged it violently against a pillar of the veranda, and lo and behold, the knob fell off! As Helen stooped to pick it up, he exclaimed: “By Jove, for *once* you are right! There is something in this old bamboo. It's chock full of papers! Possibly it has something to do with my uncle's estates. Here,” he said, holding it towards Helen, “do you poke them out; I feel so nervous that I shall only tear them; be quick!”

Helen set to work cautiously, and with the assistance of two hairpins, a ~~hair~~ pin, and a certain amount of banging and shaking, she gradually extracted a tight roll of thick, yellow paper covered with writing in Hindustani, and, of course, unintelligible to herself or to her father. These papers were signed and stamped, and bore the signature of John Crawford, and a date of fifty years previously.

“Bah!” exclaimed Crawford. “How *musty* they smell!”

"No wonder! After having been concealed in the old bamboo stick for half a century!"

"They look like deeds, don't they?" he asked excitedly. "For all we know, this may mean the *fortune!*"

"Oh, Father," protested Helen. "You are always so sanguine. They are more likely to be receipts for rents."

"We must get someone to read these papers at once; someone who is a Hindi scholar." He glanced over at Helen and said: "I suppose Bennett would know all about them? What about asking him?"

"Somehow one scarcely likes to do that; how could we ask a favour?" she said. "Perhaps you might find a man in the bazaar who could translate these papers?"

"A man in the bazaar!" scoffed Crawford, "who would, no doubt, make out a pack of lies and use the deeds for his own ends—no!" he exclaimed with decision. "I'll take them over to Bennett myself. After all, I was his schoolfellow, and he is bound to give me a leg-up." This was Crawford's expectation from all his friends.

"What have we here?" inquired Anne, approaching. "Oh, my! what a mess, and that nice stick all broken up! What a peety!"

"I'm not sure that it is a pity, Mrs. MacNab. Look at all these papers we found inside the stick; they are leases and deeds that my uncle must have concealed there fifty years ago. Of course they may mean nothing. On the other hand, they may mean a great deal."

Anne approached the table and took up one piece

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of coarse paper after another. She turned them upside down; she looked at them sideways; finally she examined the stamps. "Of course, I am not a clever woman," she said, after a pause; "but if you ask *me*, I do not think they are up to much—no. All the same, better go and show to the Deputy Commissioner. He is at home now, and he is a learned man, and can read Hindi and Marathi."

She had hardly finished speaking before Crawford had risen and collected the papers. "I don't like to be seen," he admitted, alluding to his still black eye; "but in a matter of vital importance such as this, I feel I could go through fire and water," and snatching up his hat he fled down the steps.

Two long, mortal hours elapsed before his return, and during this time Helen was secretly excited. If the deeds were important, what a change they might make in their circumstances! There would be no longer any occasion to look for treasure, since, by all accounts, John Crawford was a great landowner, and land in India meant money. Anne MacNab, who sat in her arm-chair tranquilly knitting a stocking, was aware of the girl's suppressed anxiety; she noticed how she clasped and unclasped her hands; how she got up and paced the veranda; how once or twice she had even made a round of the garden; and when she returned to her post in the veranda how steadily her eyes were fixed upon the piers at the entrance to the compound.

"I would not be too hopeful, Missy," said Anne, "for then, when a house of cards falls down, it does not hurt so *badly*. I think it is only one of your father's queer fancies, and those papers are just re-

ceipts for rent, or even for native dishes. It is getting on for dinner-time; shall we dine?"

"Somehow, Anne, I feel as if I could not eat a morsel."

"And yet you must eat; you must keep up your strength. I know exactly how you feel. I was just as shaky the day I was waiting to hear if I could get a lease of this farm. Sometimes I said to myself 'it is yes,' and again I would say 'it is no.'"

Dinner at Mrs. MacNab's had been eaten and forgotten, the cloth had been cleared away, and she and Helen sat at the big teak table, with a tall Argand lamp diffusing its light about the room.

Ah, there were steps at last; the steps of two people. Crawford entered with blazing eyes, triumph written on his face. He was immediately followed by Mr. Bennett, who shook hands very cordially with Helen and said:

"I am glad to say we bring you good news, Miss Crawford." As he concluded he nodded to Anne, and placed the papers on the table. "I have gone over these leaves and papers very carefully," he added, now seating himself and putting on his glasses, "and, as far as I can judge, the whole thing is perfectly clear. The land belonging to John Crawford he received from Government at what is called 'Mac Fi,' that is to say, rent free. Apparently he bought it at the low figure of two rupees an acre. There is a great deal of his land at present in the hands of the Government, who assumed that Crawford had left no heirs. But the old man's will is plain. He leaves all his property to the next of his kindred, and to their descendants, and Government, when your father's

identity has been proved by his London solicitor, will restore the estate, no doubt. It appears to be very considerable. There are forest lands, waste lands, large tracts under cultivation, and about forty villages. If all goes well—and I see no reason to anticipate otherwise—your father becomes a wealthy Thakur; in other words, a rich man ! ”

CHAPTER XXVIII

HELEN'S GRANDMOTHER

THE discovery of old John Crawford's documents in a bamboo walking-stick naturally caused a tremendous sensation in Chitari. The bazaar—where all the most private concerns of Sahibs are openly debated and discussed—was profoundly interested; servants and staff employed by Mrs. MacNab and the Residency accorded a vast increase of respect to the future owner of forty villages; a Thakur indeed! As for John Crawford himself, he was in a condition of irrepressible restlessness and feverish excitement. How many cigarettes did he begin and throw away? How many times did he pace the veranda? How often did he rush over to his friend the Deputy Commissioner to ask his opinion, and receive his support and encouragement? For in the matter of this business—being ignorant of legal technicalities and the Hindi language—he was as helpless as a child. Mr. Bennett threw himself into the affair with all his heart and soul, not merely on account of his old schoolfellow, but because anything connected with the tenure of land had for him a particular fascination. He was well known to hold sound opinions, and to be unusually learned in the matters of assessments, Government settlements, and the old patriarchal system. The papers were dated 1841, and it was evident that old John Crawford held his

property by long possession and strong proprietary rights.

By Bennett's advice cables were drawn up and dispatched to Crawford's London solicitor. This was, of course, rather an expensive proceeding, but Helen had returned from her situation in Bhundara with a considerable amount of rupees, and these could not be expended in a better cause. The family hopes and consultations brought Helen and her discarded admirer into daily communication; apparently time had healed his wounds, and his manner now was exceedingly friendly and paternal as he expounded the mazy intricacies of law and land, and his expectations for a successful issue. Once more Helen accompanied him round the garden and noted and commended his alterations and improvements; also the still glaring block of granite, sacred to Mahadeo. Together the pair dispassionately discussed her parent as they paced the lawns with leisured steps.

"He has such an excitable temperament," said Helen, "and this wonderful discovery has almost turned his head, poor man! What troubles him particularly is, that he feels so useless, and yet he is so eager to be up and doing. He cannot endure delays; the post hour drives him out of bed; he is down at the post office long before the arrival of the mail tonga. If there is no English letter he returns a miserable man—so little depresses him now! You have been most wonderfully kind; I do not believe we could ever have made any progress but for you."

"No, no," protested Bennett, "not a bit of it.

I'm glad to help a friend—and you,” glancing at her from under his white eyelashes. “It is rather an intricate problem; but the whole thing interests me enormously, and, of course, I'm something of a lawyer. As far as I can judge the deeds and the will are water-tight. Of course, there is an element of difficulty, and I shall be curious to see what the Government will say and do, when called upon to relinquish a fine property, whose revenues they have been receiving for at least forty years. I don't know what will be done about the arrears.”

“Yes,” said Helen. “That's what father is always talking about—the ‘arrears,’ and making calculations on little bits of paper. He expects to receive about three hundred thousand pounds.”

“What absolute nonsense!” rejoined Bennett. “But your father was always a fellow to see everything *couleur de rose*. As far as I can judge he will not get three hundred thousand pice. If he receives the income from the land fairly soon, he may think himself lucky! The great thing is—to get a move on. I believe I can pull a few strings,” he added, with the pride that apes humility.

“That will be kind of you! The sooner something is settled the better, for, as I have already told you, this delay—although it's only for a month—is getting on father's nerves, and every day he is becoming more restless and, in a way, desperate. He says that he feels as if someone were offering him a cup of cold water, and his hands were tied and he couldn't reach it.”

“I'll tell you what,” said Bennett, confidentially; “how would it be if he were to go down to Nagpur.

and consult a legal firm to whom I can recommend him? There he could blow off steam and find other matters to engage his attention."

"Oh, yes," agreed Helen; "I think your idea is splendid! The change will take him out of himself; he will feel that he is doing something; and, of course, there will be Lily. Father and Lily have always been the best of friends."

The Deputy Commissioner again looked at her from under his white eyelashes; no—no *arrière pensée* lay behind her remark. Apparently it had never dawned upon her that in the handsome Eurasian she might one day find a stepmother!

"I think if I were you, I should start him off at once; the sooner the better, for I agree with you that the strain is too much for a man of his sanguine and imaginative temperament; he seems a bit unbalanced. Yesterday, when I was out motoring near Macha, quite ten miles from here, I overtook him on foot, walking along in the dust as if for a wager. He told me that he wanted to get out of himself when I halted and insisted on him taking a seat in the motor. I suppose he could be ready to go the day after tomorrow? And as to money, I——"

"No, no," interrupted Helen, hastily. "You are too good! You know I received a handsome salary at the Palace, and the money will be all right. But where is he to stay? I suppose there is no room for him among Lily's relatives?"

"Oh, Lord, no! I expect they are crowded to the roof as it is. But I know a very decent fellow, a road contractor, married, with no family, who might take him in as a P.G. It would be better than at the dāk

bungalow, at any rate. I will write to him to-night."

"It is very, very kind of you to take all this trouble," said Helen, as they parted at the entrance to the Residency.

"Of course, I am aware that all my hopes are extinguished and dead. I have buried them decently, and you will see no *ghosts*; but you must always realise that in me you have a friend, and that I would do anything for you"—then he gave a sudden laugh and added: "short of embezzlement or murder! And as for this inheritance of your father's, which is strictly entailed, you can rely upon me to put the thing through."

Mr. Bennett's suggestion respecting Nagpur was acclaimed with enthusiasm—not only by Crawford himself, but by Anne, who said:

"Oh, my dear man—why, it is the very thing! You will go down at once. I will see that the dobi has all your shirts ready to-morrow, and you will be just in time for Lorna's wedding, which is on Saturday."

"So I shall," he assented eagerly. "I have had so much to think of that Lorna and her wedding went clean out of my mind. I must give her a present," and he glanced at Helen.

"I expect the house is very full now," said Helen. "Or the de Castros would put y
able Anne. They are so good-natured, and so fond
They have asked me over and over, e
telegrams; but just now I cannot leave the farm,
even for Lorna's wedding. She and her young m

can come and stay with me later. That will be much better than my crowding up the de Castros, and besides, I am wanted here—oh, so much to do! There is the guava jam, there is the wheat crop, and there is the sick bullock—not one of these things can I leave! No!”

“I’m sorry,” said Crawford. “You and I could have travelled down together, and I would have looked after you.”

“I think it would be the other way about,” said Anne with a laugh. “How could you talk to the tonga wallahs and railwaymen?”

“Mr. Bennett knows of a family who would take father in,” said Helen. “He is writing to them this evening.”

“If you go to-morrow,” said Anne, “better send

“I shall start to-morrow,” said Crawford with decision. “And I’ll just run over to Bennett and ask him to telegraph and let me have the address. Then I shall order the tonga.” Taking up his hat, he turned to Helen and said: “And what about the money, my dear? This will be a pretty costly business—and cash down.”

“Oh, that will be all right, Father,” she replied. “I can let you have three hundred rupees.”

“In notes, I hope?”

“Yes.”

“Good girl!” he exclaimed. “I’ll try and make it do,” and he disappeared into the gathering darkness.

John Crawford duly arrived at Nagpur, from whence he wrote long and flowing accounts of his

interview with solicitors, his welcome by the de Castros, his comforts as paying guest. Besides this came many sheets of scented pink paper, covered with Lily's scrawl, faithfully describing the glories of her niece's wedding—the presents, the dresses, the dancing, the wonderful success of the whole affair. Lorna was delighted that Mr. Crawford came down to it; he did look so distinguished, he was far the handsomest man in the whole crowd. "Now he is not only handsome, but going to be awfully rich; oh, my, I am so *glad*. We have had such talks, and he is so happy. And oh, he does dance beautifully. He and I danced ever so many times together at the wedding ball, and my!—but the other women did envy me!"

Very agreeable bulletins were received from time to time from Lily and from Crawford. At last one morning a letter arrived which considerably astonished the household. There was one from Crawford for his daughter, and one to Anne from Lily.

"Laurie's Hotel, Agra."

"MY DEAR HELEN,—You will open your eyes when you see the above address, and you will open them still wider when I tell you that Lily and I were *married* in Nagpur the day before yesterday. We have always been congenial, as you know. She is very beautiful, amiable, and devoted to me, and I feel confident that you will think I have done the wise thing. Some day, before long, you will leave me yourself, and I should be left to endure a lonely old age. This catastrophe is

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now out of the question, Lily being my junior by twenty years. I would not have dreamt of taking such a serious step as marriage had I not such excellent prospects to offer. It would have been intolerable to have married Lily a penniless man and have had to live upon her mother's bounty. Now, of course, there is no question of that. Your future, from a monetary point of view, is secure, for, according to old Crawford's will, every penny, and every acre, must descend to my surviving heir at law, so you are an heiress.

"I hope Mrs. MacNab will be pleased with our marriage. The de Castros are delighted—a most overpoweringly affectionate family; I never was so kissed in all my life! Kind of the girls, but I do hate their perfumes. I am very fond of Anne MacNab—such a generous, restful creature who goes her own way in life. As we are now connections, I am sure she will be glad of your company. After the honeymoon we intend to do Delhi and Benares; Lily and I mean to go up to Pachmarhi for the hot weather. We shall take a good-sized furnished house, and there I hope you will join us.

"Write me a nice letter. Lily sends her best, best love.—I am your attached father,

"JOHN CRAWFORD."

Having read this epistle, Helen went in search of Anne. She found her seated in the veranda, with many sheets of pink paper in her lap and a dazed expression upon her usually wide-awake countenance.

"Oh, my!" was all she could find to say. Then, after a pause: "To think of that Lily girl marrying your father! I never dreamt of this. Noa! noa! But I am afraid I am a blind old fool. I thought she only liked him as a sort of uncle—but I am stupid. I have only eyes for cattle and crops."

"Then you do not approve of the match?" inquired Helen.

"Yes, now that the shock is over and things do not seem to go round and round, I think it is all right. Lily is fond of him; she is thirty-one years of age, and she was restless here. Lily does not like this life—no, she likes dances and society, and gay frocks and gentlemen. Oh, they will suit; but they will spend a great deal of money. However, I shall give Lily a little word and tell her to keep accounts—same like she did in the Hotel. Oh, she knows the value of rupees, does that girl! Your father—no!"

"In my father's letter he says that they are taking quite a long honeymoon, so I am afraid you will have to keep me for some time, Anne."

"The longer the better; I would keep you *altogether*—and that is so," she responded with animation. "And, dear Missy, one very happy thing about this marriage is that it makes you and me *relations*. Yes, your father is now my son-in-law. His daughter is therefore *my* daughter!" and she took Helen into her arms, and enfolded her in a long embrace.

It would seem just now as if it were the function of the Crawford family to supply the station with startling news. First there was Helen's affair with

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the Deputy Commissioner, then there was Crawford's return from Bhundara, the hero of a palace scandal; next came the discovery that he was a great land-owner, and now last, and by no means least, his marriage to Lily MacNab! On the whole the bazaar approved!

Helen, with her topi and umbrella, hurried over to the Forest Bungalow, carrying the great intelligence to Mrs. Hyde who, amazing to relate, was not in the least surprised.

"Yes, I have seen it coming for months and wondered how it would end. I rather expected that Lily would force the pace and obtain her mother's consent to receiving your father as her son-in-law and inmate. What do you think about the marriage, Helen?"

"I really am not sure," she replied. "You must give me a little time to collect my scattered wits. Like Anne, I have been blind to what has been going on under my very nose. I knew father liked Lily—she amused him, and he admired her—but I never dreamt of anything like *this*! He is at least twenty years older than she is."

"But there was a greater disparity between you and Mr. Bennett," said Mrs. Hyde.

"Yes, that's true. I was certainly amazingly stupid."

"The marriage has my approval," announced Mrs. Hyde, who had been permitted to read Crawford's letter. "As your father says, when you are settled he would be faced with a life of solitude. Now there is an end to that; Lily will always keep him entertained, and, for all her queer, lackadaisical airs, she

has a large amount of sound common sense—although I admit that it is not on the surface. She will keep your father's expenditure strictly within bounds." Helen smiled incredulously. "Oh, yes, she will! She is a handsome woman; those glorious eyes could wheedle him out of anything, and Lily will carry the purse. There may be a certain amount of outlay, but it will always be within reason. I have often gone shopping with Lily, and so I know exactly what I am talking about. She is a wonderful bargainer—it is in her blood—and can get more out of a rupee than any woman I've ever come across. She will make a splash, but she will save in expenses that do not show and will always have a good sum in hand."

"I am glad you can tell me this!" said Helen. "It is a great comfort, for with all father's prospective fortune, his great property, and numbers of villages, I could still see him as a ship without a rudder—sailing along to the Niagara Falls of bankruptcy!"

"There's not the least danger of that, with Lily MacNab as manager of the exchequer. I see that your father talks of a house in Pachmarhi this hot weather. You know that Rob expects his promotion. We have decided to go to Pachmarhi, it is central for his work in the Satpuras, and you must promise to come to us."

"But Father and Lily——"

"Possibly the newly married pair may prefer to be by themselves," interrupted her friend. "Two is company, three are trumpery; and I shall be so thankful for your society when Rob is away on his

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long rounds. If you desire to be very independent and ceremonious, you may pay me a nominal sum. Rob and I are now comparatively well off, and my father has now undertaken to be responsible for the schooling of our two eldest boys, and so we are, as an Irish friend used to say, 'on the pig's back.' "

"I should be delighted to come to you," said Helen. "I know that I shall have a most delightful time."

"By the way," said Mrs. Hyde suddenly, "have you heard lately from Harvey Strong?"

"No, but to tell the truth, I did not answer his last letter."

"Oh, was it so disagreeable?"

"No; but somehow I felt reluctant to write and explain about Bhundara, and the reason I had to leave. I felt so—well—ashamed!"

"My dear, there was no occasion for you to feel ashamed. And, anyway, I have written to Harvey and told him all about it. I suggest that you send him a letter without delay and inform him of your father's marriage. I think he will be amused."

"Amused!" repeated Helen, a little ruffled.

"Oh, well, perhaps that's not exactly the right word. Anyhow, I know that he will be *interested*. And so your father is now Mrs. MacNab's son-in-law—and Lorna's uncle!"

"Yes," assented Helen. "And now I'm going to say something that *you* may find funny and amusing. Do you know—though breathe it not in Gath—I am very glad indeed to be connected with Mrs. MacNab.

Of course, she is now my *grandmother*," and with this amazing announcement, and a light-hearted laugh, Helen took her departure.

On her way back from the Forest Bungalow she overtook Mr. Bennett on foot, exercising his two fox terriers.

As they shook hands, she said :

"This morning's post brought us a great piece of news."

"Oh, about the estates?" he said. "Anything important?"

"Nothing about the estates, but very important. I had a letter from Father to say that he was married to Lily MacNab the day before yesterday!"

The news was so unexpected that the Deputy Commissioner came to an abrupt halt. Then he repeated: "Married to Lily MacNab! Good Lord, you are not in earnest?" Having made this exclamation, he turned and walked on in silence. So old Crawford had fallen into the pit from which he himself had escaped—oh, *what* an old fool! Possibly, in the whole of Chitari, the Deputy Commissioner was the exception who seriously disapproved of the recent alliance; but then he had very strong opinions respecting inter-marriages with natives of the country, and he said to himself that for all Crawford knew he might now be indirectly connected with half the bazaar! And, with this gloomy conviction, he bade a melancholy farewell to Helen and turned into his own gate.

Since Lily, Lorna, and Crawford were all three married—their three chairs standing empty—

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Helen and Anne were tête-à-tête. The hot weather was closing in, leaves were beginning to fall and whirl about the roads; the ice supply had put in an appearance from seven in the morning till sundown, the chicks were lowered, and the Hydes and their white-faced children had departed. Mr. Bennett was in Jubblepore, and there was scarcely a soul at the station but the Pereiras, Manfredos, and Stocks.

Helen, however, found Anne a host in herself—the more she saw of this excellent, motherly woman the more she liked her; hers was a character that bore microscopic inspection—upright, broadminded, liberal yet cautious, always busy and industrious and almost painfully truthful.

Why were her descendants so different to herself? Undoubtedly attractive in appearance, but pleasure-loving, indolent, affectionate, demonstrative, and—untrustworthy. Perhaps it was because her love of Mother Earth—and incidentally the land—had brought out something nobler and more vital in the older woman's character; moreover, Yorkshire was in her blood.

Her charities were large. Every Sunday morning a ragged crowd of the lame, blind and halt assembled behind one of the big cowsheds, there to receive their dole; cases of leprosy, elephantiasis, deformity, ophthalmia, were present, and more than one half-naked Khoru bore the marks of his encounter with tiger or panther—the latter the more dreadful of the two, for, unlike his big brother, he is not a gentleman.

To these unfortunate creatures Anne distributed

grain, ghi, a little money, and now and then some clothes. Her hands were ever open, and she assured Helen—who acted as her assistant—that “it was lucky to give.” “I get it arl back,” she concluded, with a broad smile. “It is not charity—noa. It is an invēstment—same as I put so many seers of seed in ground.”

The many acres of cultivation were to her a continual source of interest, joy and anxiety; early on these hot mornings she would rise to inspect her property, frequently accompanied by Helen; the dew lay heavy on the land as they watched the green dawn spread along the horizon, the birds awoke and jungle cocks began to crow. During the heat of the day the two friends remained in semi-darkness, with the damp cuscus tatties stopping up the doorways. They did not talk continually—they knew each other too well—but Anne sometimes discoursed at length on the subject of her dearly beloved crops, her several hopes of wheat, gram, cotton, and cane, and Helen listened with attentive ears as she had been at many of the sowings, and was almost as interested as the proprietress herself. Helen would sew and read, Anne would knit and read. Her book was usually a shabby old Bible, and the portions she read and re-read were the Psalms of David, the Gospel of St. John, and the Revelation of St. John the Divine. The description of jewels appealed to her most powerfully.

Later, when the air had cooled, the companions would stroll forth and wander round the garden, or even out along the Forest Road, until sunset—and what sunsets! So splendid, and yet so unnatural

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and dramatic ! One evening, when the westerly sky was painted a fiery scarlet and through the now naked trees it glowed like a furnace behind black bars, Anne, having surveyed it, said :

“My dear Missy, that is a real hot weather sign, so in two or three days I shall send you off to the Hydes, at Pachmarhi.”

CHAPTER XXIX

SOCIAL JEALOUSY

PACHMARHI, which is situated on a plateau among the Mahadeo Hills, was discovered by Captain J. Forsyth, the author of "The Highlands of Central India," who was sent in 1862, under the auspices of Sir Richard Temple, the Chief Commissioner of that day, to explore this portion of the Satpura Forests, and this delightful "find" was the result.

In the hot weather Pachmarhi is the resort of the Central Provinces, and the sanatorium of English troops. There is a fine residency, a school of musketry, a court-house, a club, a racecourse, and a large and scattered cantonment. The climate is only ten degrees cooler than the plains, but there is generally a fresh breeze. The outlook is quite beautiful, the plateau being surrounded by forest glades, deep ravines, and gorges, sometimes picturesque and sometimes of imposing grandeur. The headlands are covered with immense grassy spaces and clumps of fine trees, such as sal, teak and mango, and resemble an English park, and every eminence commands a wide view of distant hills and rolling valleys. One of the chief charms of Pachmarhi is its vivid colouring, especially by the evening light, when the rich reds of the sandstone mellow into wonderful shades of purple and violet in the setting sun.

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In the month of April Helen Crawford found herself in this delightful spot as P.G. with the Hydes. Her father and Lily rented a large, gaudily furnished bungalow, with double tennis-courts, in the centre of the station, and there continually entertained their friends. Crawford's claim had been acknowledged by Government, one of the Indian banks had made him a considerable advance, and he would have looked upon his purse as bottomless, and scattered money with both hands, but for the interposition of prudent Lily. She was now the gay matron, fashionably dressed, important, effusive, and, in her own set, popular. She gave luncheon parties, tennis parties, and elaborate picnics, and, as Mrs. Crawford, was realising her highest ambitions, and enjoying the time of her life. Anne had been urged to join her daughter. Lily was anxious that she should behold her triumphs and share in them too, as she was really attached to her parent, but her invitations were emphatically declined. Sad to relate, the English cow was dead! Mrs. MacNab was inconsolable, and not inclined for jauntings and gaiety. Also, she was not alone in her trouble, as Mrs. de Castro, Lorna and her husband were staying with her, and from what Helen knew of Lorna she would certainly work upon her grandmother's feelings and intensify the loss of the English cow by her sympathy and tears.

Mrs. Hyde and Helen were not nearly so prominent in society as Mr. and Mrs. Crawford, but they contented themselves with occasional tennis, walks, tea-picnics, and other moderate amusements.

Rob Hyde was from home, working in the

Satpuras, and his wife did not entertain. Nevertheless, her young lady friend was greatly admired. Crawford, who realised this, felt proud of his daughter and made a determined effort to establish her under his own roof, but to this suggestion both Helen and Lily turned deaf ears.

"Why you want to steal your girl from Mrs. Hyde, who brought her here as her companion?" demanded Lily, and her voice was shrill. "No, no, cannot be done! You can see her every day, and she is happy as she is. Besides, I shall want the spare room for some of my Nagpur friends. You know I must ask up the de Castros."

This news was a shock to Crawford—the noisy, gushing, overpowering de Castros were in his opinion much better at Nagpur than circulating in this entirely "Europe" element. There was a place for everything, and in his opinion the proper place for the chattering and powdered de Castros was a large, rambling bungalow in the plains. However, he made no audible objection. To tell the truth, he was entirely dominated by Lily. He was really very proud of his handsome second wife—how admirably she played tennis and danced, how genial her greetings to her guests; she was exceedingly popular, streams of people seemed to pass through the bungalow all the day long. Naturally it is only human nature to flock to where a handsome and gracious hostess offers well-considered and toothsome tiffins, refreshments, and dinners—not to speak of first-class tennis and cheery company. Lily was rather too gushing to those she considered her superiors, and a little too patronising to those she

looked upon as a rung beneath her on the social ladder. Strange fact, her "chi chi" accent was much more remarkable in Pachmarhi than in Chitari; she generally talked at the top of her voice, and her vehemence and gesticulations were almost unrestrained. Once or twice, when playing tennis with her stepdaughter, Lily's laugh and scream had startled Helen—was it not the very echo of what she had heard on the Badminton courts in the Palace gardens? Oh, what a contrast to her own mother—so quiet, so restrained, so weighed down by responsibility and poverty that she rarely laughed, and certainly never screamed.

The Chief Commissioner at Pachmarhi was Sir Henry Webber, an able pro-consul and a hard-working official. His wife, Lady Webber, a charming and beautiful woman, had known Mrs Hyde in the days of her prosperity, when she had been the only daughter of a wealthy house. She had heard all about her foolish marriage, and subsequent poverty, and now came forward with an outstretched hand, glad to renew the friendship. Lady Webber had no family; she was a delicate woman, cultivated, and dignified, who had no use for frantic sets of tennis or boisterous games. Some people said that she was stuck up, others declared that she was mean; but no one could deny that the Residence gave first-rate dinner parties, where the menu and the champagne were alike unimpeachable. She helped the local charities, but she seldom entered the Club, or accepted invitations to gigantic picnics. On the other hand, she would go and have tea very quietly in Mrs. Hyde's garden, and Helen

and her hostess frequently dined *en famille* at the Residency, where Helen's music was a source of great pleasure to the weary Commissioner, whilst his wife and Mrs. Hyde whispered of old times in the veranda. These little dinners were kept secret as much as possible, for the representative of the Crown cannot afford to make favourites. But naturally these gatherings were talked of in the Bazaar, and from the Bazaar it was a short distance to the Club, and a certain amount of jealousy was aroused. None more jealous than Lily, whose advances to Lady Webber had been somewhat coolly received. At first she cut Helen dead for two whole days, then she came over to the bungalow and gave her stepdaughter a bit of her mind. She demanded to know "why she went sneaking over to the Residency—had dined there three times in a fortnight and never told her one word?"

"I did not think you would be interested, Lily; and, after all, Mrs. Hyde and Lady Webber are old, old friends and like to see each other as much as possible, without formality. There has never been any party."

"No; but you had the aide-de-camp, and the military secretary who is so good-looking, and one time you had a lord."

"Yes, who came unexpectedly for a day and night to see the place."

"Ah, I dare say! But why should *you* of all people be asked to meet him?"

"For no reason whatever; he took no interest in me, I can assure you. He is a married man with a grown-up family, and a celebrated geologist. He

came here to examine the peculiar nature of the red sandstone."

"Bah, the red sandstone! When are you going to the Residency again?"

"To-night, I think."

"You will be getting too grand to come and see my humble house, since you are hand in hand with Lady Webber. Oh, you are a sly snake—a pig—pushing up to grandees—and a toady—a——"

This was intolerable. Helen felt it was now time to take the situation in hand, and she said:

"I cannot understand what you mean by coming and talking to me in this way. If you repeat it, Lily, I shall not only not visit at your house, but I shall decline to receive you here!"

Lily opened her mouth and closed it in amazed silence.

"There is no occasion for us to have a family quarrel. I do not wish to be separated from my father, but if you insist upon coming and making these scenes there must be a breaking-off of intercourse. You, as far as I can see, have made my father very happy, and I do not understand why you should deliberately go out of your way to try and make me otherwise. I am sure that Anne would not be pleased to hear that you had called me a pig, a snake, and a toady!"

"Yes," burst out Lily impulsively; "that is a true word; she would be awfully angry with me, and it is nice of you to say that I have made your father happy, and I am happy, too." And she snatched at Helen and kissed her violently. "I *do* love you!"

"Then, dear Lily, why did you cut me at the Club

the last two days? And why do you come here and say all sorts of things?"

"Well, then, I will tell you the truth. It is all because of that devil, Lady Webber. She makes so much of you; she will have none of *me*. She thinks I am noisy, I am told. Anyway, she accepted an invitation to a tea-party at the Butlers—just poor people drawing five hundred rupees a month; and when I asked her to a big tiffin, and ordered up a ham and *pâté de foie gras* and truffles from Bombay—she '*regretted*.' Oh, it did make me feel so sick, and I know the Lucases and Montfords, were so glad; I shall never get over it!" and Lily flung herself down among the sofa cushions and sobbed. However, after a little time she recovered. Helen consoled and soothed her, brought a clean handkerchief and eau-de-Cologne, and wiped her tears.

"Oh, you are so good," gasped Lily, whose recent emotion had left her breathless. "Your father always said so. Now I want you to be a little extra good for *me*. We have always been chums, you know. I am all *heart*, as my friends say, and I will do you a good turn some day. Lady Webber is going to a tennis party at the Monroes—I heard Mrs. Monroe boasting at the Club—and she will not come to *me*; what a slap in the face! At present I feel as if I were covered with black shame, and think everyone is saying: 'There is the woman that her ladyship has put aside and snubbed'!"

"But you know that is ridiculous, Lily. Lady Webber seldom goes anywhere."

"But she might come to me, even to lunch or tea," urged the persistent climber. "Can you not get Lady

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Webber to come to my house? You know you could, dearie, if you tried. Just drop one little word to-night; tell her that I am your *mother*, and it is done! I do not ask for dinner, or even tiffin; but just a friendly family tea—to *show*. Oh, for you, so easy, darling, sweetie girl, and it will please your father; as for the Monroes—they will cut their throats!"

"Well, Lily, I can't promise," said Helen; "but I'll see what can be done. Do not ask a party, for it may not come off."

"Oh, you angel of angels," cried Lily, overwhelming her with kisses and caresses, and presently she announced herself to be fit to walk back to her own bungalow. Hither Helen accompanied her, and into her ears were poured abject apologies and protestations of undying affection. In the veranda Helen had a moment's interview with her father, who said:

"I see Lily seems a good deal upset."

"Yes; and altogether her own fault. She ran over this morning intending to upset *me*, but it did not come off."

"I suppose it's all about your dining at the Residency? She's mad about that."

"Yes; Lily must try and control her feelings."

"She can't; you know it's not in her. She must always have her say out, and then it's over."

"A few sensible, sharp words would put a stop to this; it's only a habit, and should not be encouraged. I do not think Lily will come again in a hurry in order to have her 'say out' with me."

"I believe you can be very fierce, Helen."

"No, no, Father; only cruel to be kind! Will you and Lily come over and have tennis with us to-

morrow? Of course, our courts are not up to yours; but I will get one or two good players—including the A.D.C. I dare say that will please Lily."

"I dare say it will; and you can bury the hatchet in the tennis net!"

"Lily Crawford has been over this morning," announced Mrs. Hyde to her husband. "She came to do battle with Helen, but as far as I can gather she was beaten off with great loss."

"Good! I can imagine it. Why does not Crawford keep his wife in order?"

"Too much bother; if someone else would undertake her discipline, that would be all right."

"Mind you, he's uncommonly proud of his lively, good-looking consort number two."

"Yes, we can all see that; and yet I always feel sorry for wife number one. I am sure she had a thin time and much hard labour. And Lily will get her own way in everything, which will be so bad for her. I wish she had married a man like James Hawkins; he would have kept her nose to the currystone!"

"Ha—ha—ha!" burst out Hyde. "Old James Hawkins is no fool, although he has his weakness."

"You mean, his notorious meanness—almost amounting to dishonesty," said Lucy Hyde, with some heat.

"Oh, come now, Lucy; why are you so down on him?"

"I am not down on him in my heart; I'd a thousand times rather have him than John Crawford—with his immaculate clothes, agreeable manners, and immovable smile."

"Well, you see, Crawford lives in an ever-golden atmosphere, through which numbers of illusions beam upon him kindly, and this, no doubt, has affected his whole life!"

"Yes, he has been lucky in having two slaves—Helen and her mother. Everything has been done for him, as far as lay in their power. He, for all his bonhomie, would never help anyone."

"At any rate, his methods have met with conspicuous success; there is hardly a grey hair in his head."

"No; I wish he were bald! I cannot bear him; and in my opinion he has only an after-dinner sense of right and wrong."

"I must say you are a good hater, Lucy; and talking of dinner reminds me that it is time for tiffin—so come along!"

CHAPTER XXX

MRS. HYDE ORDERS CHAMPAGNE

IN the neighbourhood of Pachmarhi there are some good points of view; access to them has been facilitated by the construction of paths. Some of these views can be obtained from Lansdowne Hill and from the top of the Ancient Caves. It was the custom of Helen and her friend to walk to one of these sites of an afternoon and there have tea, the basket being carried by a coolie. In turn they visited Watersmeet, Ciematis Point, and the Bee Fall. One evening, when they returned, the bearer informed them that a sahib had arrived, and there, seated in the drawing-room, was Harvey Strong.

"Oh, Harvey!" exclaimed his cousin. "What good wind has blown you here?"

"A good wind and a six weeks' leave," shaking hands with his cousin and her friend. "I did not know for certain that it would be confirmed, so I said nothing until I got a wire, and then I came off at once. I'm putting up at the Club," he added.

"Oh, are you?" said Mrs. Hyde. "Rob is away again, and I could take you in here."

"Thanks awfully, but I've settled up with the Club butler for six weeks. My bearer is unpacking my kit; you shall have as much of my society as you like!"

"I should like a good deal," rejoined Mrs. Hyde.

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"How is Rob," he inquired, "and the kids?"

"All flourishing, thank you. You will stay to dinner, of course?"

"Yes, if I may?"

"Then I will just go and have a word with the khansamah, and tell him"—and she laughed—"to water the soup." So saying she departed, and left Helen and Harvey Strong alone.

"A good deal of water has run under the bridge since we last met," he said.

"Yes; many things have happened."

"Chiefly to your father; I heard all about your stay at Bhundara from Lucy. Your father rather put his foot into it there, didn't he?"

"He did; it was a sort of temporary insanity."

"And now he has got the Crawford property. I believe old Bennett managed this in a masterly fashion."

"He certainly took no end of trouble. I think, only for him, the matter would never have been carried through."

"Another great change: your father is married to Miss MacNab. I heard she was considered the beauty of Pachmarhi, and entertains no end. I suppose you will live with them when Lucy goes home?"

"I really have not considered the matter; but I think, if I settle anywhere, it will be with Mrs. MacNab."

"What! At Chitari? Nonsense!"

"Yes, I love Chitari, and I love Mrs. MacNab."

Harvey Strong, who had been standing in front of Helen, now took a turn about the room. Then he came back and said suddenly:

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"And I love *you*, Miss Crawford! I did not mean to blurt this out so soon, but you gave me such a splendid opening that I could not resist it. I ask you if you think you could possibly make your home with me?"

Helen was considerably startled and bewildered by this abrupt question. Although she had always been aware that Harvey Strong cared for her—a proposal had been on his lips the last time they had met—yet it seemed so odd that it should be repeated in this prosaic way, and at such an inappropriate moment—just before dinner, in Mrs. Hyde's drawing-room! The garden at the Residency was a far more romantic setting than this shabby, ill-furnished hill bungalow. Her answer would certainly be "Yes"; she had felt attracted to Harvey Strong, even when he was so aloof and disagreeable on the *Paragon*; there was something trustworthy and masterful about his character. As she sat in silence, he resumed, in a hurried, unsteady voice :

"I'm sure you will find it hard to believe that I was in love with you when we were on board the *Paragon*. I was not only immensely attracted by yourself—but I could not help admiring your kindness to that wretched girl, and your patience with"—a pause, he was about to say, your father, but added : "other people. Just then I was working hard to satisfy an insatiable ambition, and I stood at cross-roads. Should I follow love—it might prove an *ignis fatuus*; but the other path, though rough, was reliable. So I choked down my inclinations, and parted from you without a word. But do as I would, work as I would, I could not keep you out of my

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thoughts, and I came up to Chitari to see how the land lay. My hopes were kindling, when your father crushed them, with two words, and—naturally—I realised that I couldn't compete with such a rival as a little tin god! However, I heard the truth from Lucy, and here I am again—as you see.”

Helen glanced up at him, then down upon the floor; her cheeks had assumed a remarkably pretty shade of pink.

“Come, Helen,” he said, and his voice was a little hoarse, “do not sit dumb. Put me out of my suspense; is the answer to be ‘No’ or ‘Yes’?”

The answer was neither ‘No’ nor ‘Yes,’ but Helen rose to her feet, and without a word gave him her hand.

Mrs. Hyde, returning from her interview with the khansanah, pushed back the purdah at the psychological moment. Harvey Strong had taken Helen into his arms, and was kissing her with rapture. The prudent lady retreated noiselessly, and hastened to give a further order to the khansanah: “You must send over to the Club at once—to-night there will be champagne for dinner.”

CHAPTER XXXI

CRAWFORD GIVES HIS CONSENT

THE news of Miss Crawford's engagement was soon noised abroad. Harvey Strong went over to the Crawford bungalow and interviewed Crawford in due form, and was received with cordiality. Crawford was glad that Helen was so soon to settle—for looking ahead he had seen rocks and difficulties. Lily had talked effusively of Helen making her home with them, but he knew in his heart of hearts that it was all merely talk. Lily had no desire to have a second young woman in the house, and one whose superior education, manners, and customs would undoubtedly throw her into the shade.

"It will be all right," said Crawford to Strong. "I think you will suit each other uncommonly well. Helen is easily satisfied; she is fond of books; she likes an outdoor life; and she loves India. Of course, one day the chances are that she will be a very rich woman; but I must warn you that I don't expect to peg out for another thirty years—we Crawfords come of a long-lived family, but luckily you have private means!"

"So much the better, sir; I'm sure I don't want to hurry you. I have a good job and a considerable private income; I shall be able to take Helen to the hills every year; and now and then we will have a run home."

"Yes, Lily and I will do the same; she has never been home," assented Crawford. "Of course, you have heard about the Deputy-Commissioner?"

"Why, you told me about him yourself."

Crawford felt a guilty pang as he said: "Well, when it came to the point Helen backed out. I think Bennett felt it a good deal; but nothing would move her. Of course, it would have been a first-rate match."

"I don't think so," boldly argued Strong. "He is twenty-five years older than Helen. He has already had one wife. I don't think he is an object of sympathy."

"No, perhaps not—anyhow, from your point of view. Now I must take you in and introduce you to Mrs. Crawford," and he ushered him into the drawing-room and presented him with ceremony.

The visitor—and his intelligence—were received by Lily with loud manifestations of delight. How her eyes sparkled and her slender hands gesticulated as she talked of her "darling" Helen. The engagement gave her enormous satisfaction. The girl was not making a grand match; therefore, she would not be overshadowed. Apparently Harvey was well-to-do, and Helen would have a home of her own. The wedding was to take place at Pachmarhi before the end of Harvey's leave. All was settled. It would mean a big "tamasha," and some European frocks—not only for Helen, but herself; and she would play the combined rôle of fond young stepmother and hostess.

The station speedily accustomed itself to the presence of the engaged couple, and looked on benevolently as they played tennis, or danced or walked together. They were a nice-looking pair, and the

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girl was now independent of her easy-going father, and of her dark and dashing stepmother.

Lady Webber requested that the wedding might take place from the Residency; the Hydes' bungalow was out of the question, and, of course, it would have seemed proper for Helen to have been married from her father's home—but Lily only made this tardy suggestion weeks after the other invitation had been received.

A fancy ball was one of the features of the Pachmarhi season. It took place at the club—a subscription affair, and the Chitari costumes came in very conveniently for the occasion. No one approached Mrs. Crawford in effectiveness and beauty. She was besieged by partners; her dancing, her lithe grace, and her compelling dark eyes made her the cynosure of every eye; Crawford was a proud man, and comported himself as such. The simple little "Parlour-maid" and "Red Riding Hood" were positively not in it; nevertheless they appeared to have plenty of partners, and thoroughly enjoyed the ball. Among the guests was one mysterious figure: a tall, gaunt individual dressed as a mendicant friar, with a long hood arrangement pulled far over his face, through two slits of which his eyes looked out upon the wicked world. In his hands he carried a large wooden box with a rope handle, on which was inscribed "*pour les pauvres.*" This he rattled incessantly, and there was scarcely a guest into whose notice it had not been noisily thrust. The friar seemed particularly anxious to beg from Strong and Helen; he even went so far as to speak, and quick-eared Helen said:

"I know who you are, for all your make-up; I

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could tell your voice among a hundred. You are Mr. Hawkins, who came out with us in the *Paragon*."

"Bull's-eye!—right in one," he growled.

"And what brings you here?" inquired Strong.

"Those brutes of doctors," rejoined Hawkins, now removing his head-covering. "They forced me up on sick leave, but there was very little the matter with me; such an unnecessary expense! But they said it was a case of go up to Pachmarhi—or go out!"

"Well, I hope the change will do you good," said Helen politely.

"Oh, yes, I've picked up already; only been here two days."

"Are you staying at the Club?" inquired Strong.

"Yes, but the prices are terrific! I intend to have a word with the committee; the charges are monstrous. Imagine three rupees for an ordinary tiffin!"

"Well, you see, the price of food is pretty high just now," said Strong.

"Ah, of course, *you* don't mind!" snarled Hawkins. "We all know that you are a millionaire. Talking of millionaires, Miss Crawford, so your father has come in for a big property, and there *was* something in the old man's fortune after all?"

"Yes," she assented; "he expects to have the whole business wound up by the end of the year."

"And what about the jewels?"

"There is no trace of them."

"No? They are stowed away somewhere, or buried. By the way, what became of the little half-caste widow we came out with?"

"She's married again."

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"Oh, *that* sort always do!" and Hawkins burst into a harsh laugh immediately.

Here Crawford halted in front of them, with Lily on his arm. They had been dancing together. "Hallo!" he exclaimed, holding out a hand. "Fancy seeing you here!"

"Yes, sick leave, confound it! And you have become Fortune's favourite since we met?"

"This is my wife," said Crawford, presenting Lily with triumphant *impressement*.

Hawkins inspected her with his clear, keen eyes: a handsome Eurasian! Yes. He bowed profoundly, and mumbled something about "the pleasure," and Lily said:

"I hope you will come and see us, Mr. Hawkins. I have often heard my husband speak of you."

"Yes," added Crawford. "You must drop in to tiffin whenever you like. We live at Nelson House, just over the way, and shall be delighted to see you," and they passed on.

"Who is the lady?" inquired Hawkins, as he looked after the new Mrs. Crawford; there was a certain subtle provocation in her slim grace.

"She is the aunt of the little widow with whom we came out on board ship."

"Oh, Lord, you don't say so! Uncommonly handsome, I'll allow; but not my style," and he glanced at Strong and laughed. "You and I must see something of one another, Strong," he added. "I shall be awfully glad to have a 'bukh' with you, and thresh out some of our arguments."

"I hope you will come over and see *me*," said Helen. "I am staying at The Nook with my

friend Mrs. Hyde. I am sure she will be pleased to see you whenever you care to drop in."

Helen had a sort of liking for the miserly collector. Her engagement to Harvey Strong inclined her to receive all her fellow-passengers into her affections.

"Thank you awfully," said Hawkins. "I'll turn up in a day or two. At present, as I'm supposed to be an invalid, I'm going to bed, and to return my borrowed plumes. I need hardly tell you that *I'm* not the owner of this tomfoolery."

James Hawkins promptly availed himself of both invitations, and dropped in so often at The Nook and Nelson House that his club bill for tiffin was nominal; in fact, the hospitality of his friends, according to his own calculations, saved the wealthy bachelor about fifteen rupees a week.

CHAPTER XXXII

"LEND ME A PAIR OF BOOTS"

HARVEY STRONG nursed two special grievances against his friend Hawkins. Grievance number one : That their bedrooms in the club being adjacent, every morning he received a domiciliary visit from his neighbour,—generally when he was shaving. Attired in a disreputable old dressing-gown he would enter to talk, to question, or to borrow such little matters as a stick of shaving soap, a bootlace, a collar stud. The second grievance related to Hawkins' habit of dogging him and Helen, and accompanying them, unwelcome and uninvited, on their afternoon walks. He did not seem for a moment to realise the situation, or that they would have much preferred a *tête-à-tête*; but no, he would stride along between them, discussing Free Trade, Indian finance, the Elizabethan age, aeroplanes; and it must be conceded that on most questions he discoursed lucidly and well, and there were generally a few crumbs of stimulating information to be picked up.

One day Mr. Hawkins paid his usual early call upon his neighbour, who, on this occasion, had advanced as far as the manipulation of his tie.

"I say!" began Hawkins. "I've got to lunch at the Webbers to-day; he asked me to dine, but I bar Burra Khanas. I pleaded my bad health, so he has let me off with an informal tiffin. But look

here," stretching out and surveying his large feet, "I can't go in these boots, can I? I saw Webber's eyes fixed on them yesterday; so I've dropped in to see if you can lend me a pair?"

"I expect I can," replied Strong, glancing at a row ranged against the wall. "Take your choice—dancing, cricket, shooting."

Hawkins stooped and picked up a specimen, then flung it down with a sort of groan. "A full size too small! I'd never get my big hoof into your dandy brown shoes. Now what am I to do?"

"Why, buy yourself a pair, of course!" was the prompt reply. "There's a jolly good outfitter's here, where you can rig yourself out with any mortal thing."

"No, no," protested Hawkins, "they are licensed robbers! Their prices are fabulous!"

As Harvey Strong surveyed himself in the looking-glass, he suddenly made up his mind to give his visitor a talking to. He liked old Hawkins, and he was sorry to see him denying himself common necessities, going about in threadbare clothes—the scorn and laughing-stock of the whole place. With extraordinary courage and decision he decided to speak:

"I say, Hawkins," he began, "have you any near relations?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because they would be so truly grateful if they knew how you are saving for their benefit."

"My only near relative is a rascally nephew—whom I hate like poison."

"Oh, in that case I want to have a square jaw with you—even on an empty stomach. I say, I won't

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keep you two minutes,” waving a detaining hand, for it seemed as if Hawkins were about to rise and effect his escape. “Of course, you’ll say that it is no business of mine, and damned cheek, and that’s true. But you and I have often said hard words to one another when we had different opinions respecting politics, philosophy, and the characters of public men; so if I say brutal things to you now you will forgive me. I don’t like to see a man of your brains and position denying yourself; doing the cheap; wearing the clothes of a scarecrow—and for what? By all accounts you have—in fact you must have—tens of thousands of pounds, not rupees, put away and invested. Now, *who* is to benefit by all this?”

Long before the conclusion of this ovation Hawkins had backed into a seat and sat surveying Strong with parted lips, and an expression of dazed amazement.

“I say, why can’t you allow yourself some comfort and pleasure? *What* have you got out of life? Suppose you were to go and rig yourself out? It might cost you a few hundred rupees, which you will never miss. And a well-dressed man, with a good conceit of himself, is much more likely to be listened to and respected than one who is known to have tons of money and to grudge himself a decent coat; or, as in your case, a pair of boots! Stop!—I’ll have done in one moment. From what I can gather from a fellow who comes from your station, you grudge yourself nourishing food, you do not keep a cow, you walk when you should drive. During this illness of yours you had a narrow squeak; you all but went out! And if you *had* gone out, I ask you what good would your

money have done you? You should spend on yourself. Mind you, I say nothing against charities and local subscriptions. Buy a fine, high-powered motor car, live in a good bungalow, keep a decent cook; in short, have a little mercy on James Hawkins, the collector of Begumpett. And now I've done."

"Well, young man, I'm not going to take your head off, or fly at you, or even cut you dead," said Hawkins. "By Gad, you are a damned bold fellow! To say that you are officious and impudent is scarcely to give the subject words. At the same time, I'll allow that there's a great deal of *truth* in your harangue. It's a fact that I scrimp my bazaar bill, that I'm dressed like a loafer, that my contemporaries dislike and despise me; but I must confess that it gives me acute pleasure to save and put by money. I am, as you've said, a wealthy man, and, in a sort of way, a miser. Yes, I cannot help myself, for the passion is hereditary; it runs in families, like drink, gambling, lunacy, or fits—and one cannot get away from it!"

"You could—if you tried," interposed Strong.

"Easy to talk! I've tried, and I'll tell you a queer thing with regard to my weakness. I don't mind handing out fairly large sums; it's the small bills for three or four rupees that kill me!"

"Well, my experience is exactly the opposite. The small sums are mere fleabites—a matter of indifference; it's the great big totals that floor *me*!"

"I say, there's the breakfast gong; come along! After it's over I'll allow you take me down to Brown and White's and fit me out with a pair of boots. Yes, and I'll give you a couple of hundred rupees to buy

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me whatever you may think necessary, just to please you; but I make one stipulation—don't let me see prices or bills, and don't let me hear what anything costs, or I'm bound to send them all back!"

That self-same morning the pair sallied forth on a shopping expedition. The collector was fitted with a pair of respectable boots, a new hat, a new tie, and Strong gave orders for his measurement for two suits of clothes—the materials for which he himself selected, whilst his companion groaned and muttered audibly. As they subsequently walked away, Hawkins said:

"Well now, young fellow, I *hope* you're happy?"

"Pretty well, thank you. I shall feel happier when I see your name down for a thumping sum to the local institutions, and when I've heard that you have sent an order to Bombay for a first-class car."

"A first-class car! What! for me?" repeated Hawkins. "I shall order that car on the Ides of March!"

Nevertheless, James Hawkins did buy a motor car. Lucy Hyde heard about it that same evening as she sat perched on a corner of a table in her husband's office. Hyde said:

"I'm going to tell you a startling secret, so don't fall off the table."

"All right; I'm sitting tight."

"Hawkins is about to present our young couple with a motor car. Oh, yes, you may well stare! But I only had a 'nimbo' peg for lunch."

"Rob, you're joking, of course; what a far-fetched idea! Do think of some more probable 'shave'!"

"I'm serious; yes, I'll swear, if you like!"

"Then James Hawkins has lost his wits!"

"No; he came to me after tiffin in the club writing-

room, looking unusually smart and rather excited, and said: 'I wish to give young Strong a wedding present—a motor car, and I'll pay up to £1,000. Here is a cheque on the Bank of Bombay. I leave the matter entirely in your hands; I don't wish to hear any details!' and he hurried out as if he was chased."

"Well, Rob, you've given me the surprise of my life! If I were to see the clubhouse walking about the plateau I'd not be more amazed. May I see the cheque?"

"Unbeliever! I sent it off by the afternoon dāk."

"For fear he might take it back?" and she laughed. "I can enter into his feelings, poor fellow, respecting the details. Having made the great sacrifice, every additional item would be excruciating agony—such as the horrid extras for tyres and head lights and so on. However, £1,000 will buy a fine car."

"Yes, and to give the old boy his due, when he goes about giving a present he does it in style!"

"I believe this is his first—and may be his last gift. I wonder how Harvey got round him? He is really fond of Harvey, in his knock-you-down-and-trample-you way."

"Yes, after all we must allow he is mean to himself and generous to his friends."

"Friend?" she corrected.

"Oh, well, all right, I make you a present of the last word!"

The next afternoon, wearing his new boots, the collector waylaid the happy couple and accompanied

